The Accords

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/25247311.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Charlie Countryman (2013), Blood and Chocolate (2007)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Aiden (Blood and Chocolate)/Nigel (Charlie Countryman)
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Aiden (Blood and Chocolate), Nigel (Charlie Countryman), Jack Crawford, Mason Verger, Margot Verger, Bella Crawford, Will Graham's Mother, Original Characters, Beverly Katz
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Fantasy, Dragon Will, King Hannibal, Alpha Hannibal, Omega Nigel, Alpha Aiden - Freeform, Will can be an Alpha or Omega, Thanks to Dragon Biology, Fae & Fairies, Fae Magic, True Mates, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Anal Sex, they switch, Bonding, First Kiss, First Time, Hannibal and Nigel are twins, slight angst, With an always happy ending, Will Graham's mom is a male Omega named Roan and we love him
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Hollow Throne Verse
Stats:	Published: 2020-07-13 Words: 25,620 Chapters: 3/3

The Accords

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Notes

Welcome to the Accords!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

“This dry season has hit us hard; ‘tis a struggle just to feed my family, let alone the livestock. If it pleases my King, I humbly request the rations mandated to the city be lowered - only a little bit! A lighter tax would surely help to ease the burden.”

Hannibal studied the wretched-looking peasant knelt before him, all tattered clothes and more dirt than skin showing. There used to be a time when even the poorest of the kingdom’s folk would make an effort before presenting themselves at Court. If times were truly as bleak as this, *someone* in his ranks hadn’t been truthful with him in their reports. His people were well educated at least, he’d made sure of that, no matter whether they *appeared* presentable.

“Your Grace,” a quiet voice and the soft whisper of silk sounded to his right as his advisor leaned closer; the scent of roses and mint invaded his nose as Margot closed the distance between them. “This is the fourth plea to decrease ration shipments today alone. Not to mention those from last week.”

Hannibal held Court once a week, and one complaint could be coincidence, but half a dozen seemed like a pattern. “I am aware, Margot,” Hannibal murmured in response, then raised his voice to address the rest of the room. “How many among you are here today to appeal for a decrease in rations to the city?”

A large majority of the villagers rose then, with more than a few voices calling out complaints, emboldened in their unity.

“We’re starving!”

“I don’t see citizens of the city invoking ration laws!”

“The Green Folk don’t have any trouble feeding *their* people!”

To his left, Hannibal’s brother - his protector and less *official* advisor - stepped forward in a huff to address the tumultuous crowd, “Well the Green Folk live in a magical fucking forest, don’t they? I wonder how they could *possibly* feed themselves?”

“Nigel,” Hannibal chided softly, and Nigel bristled at his side. Hannibal considered the Court before him, the general unrest and trace inklings of mutiny. To them, he addressed, “From this day until specified, the rations owed to the city shall decrease by one-third. Do you in attendance find this ruling acceptable?”

If the previous grievances had been loud, the approval at Hannibal’s decree was cacophonous. He could feel the unrest from the crowd shift to the advisors at his side and ignored it. “I am hereby calling a close to Court for the day’s end. Any other matters to be brought forward may commence tomorrow morning.”

The townsfolk had barely begun to depart before Nigel was at his side, seizing his arm with a harsh hand. “You realize that’s *our food* you just gave away.”

“We’ve more than enough for now,” Hannibal volleyed back, utterly unconcerned.

“For *now,”* Nigel repeated in a hiss. “You know that we can’t sustain this city on two-thirds of what we’ve been bringing into it.”

“I apologize, your Grace, but I have to agree with Nigel,” Margot inserted, wringing her hands together fretfully and sounding wholly displeased at the admission. Hannibal didn’t miss the glare she shot at his bristly, Omegan brother. “We’ve not the stores to sustain the city through the winter at anything less than the full ration tax.”

Hannibal Lecter was an Alpha graced with a long lineage and birthright to the throne, and by such had the good fortune to command his advisors with pure force of will and confidence. The glance he cast upon Margot and Nigel was more than enough to reiterate his claim. “Then we shall have to find another way to sustain ourselves, shan’t we?”

Will sat up straighter in his nest, watching as his best friend Beverly approached at a truly terrifying speed. The pixie was sure-footed and fast, moving through the trees and underbrush like water over stones.

"Will! A human came to the border!" Only once Bev came to a stop did she sound as winded as she should be after such a long journey made so quickly. He watched her place a hand to her chest to steady herself before handing him an ornate scroll. “They’ve sent along this missive and are awaiting your reply.”

“What?” Will tried not to show his alarm, but his spine went even straighter, and then his shoulders hunched, as he leaned over the scroll and slipped a long nail through the wax, unfurling it onto his lap. The penmanship was as beautiful as the wax seal had been, but Will didn’t tarry overly long admiring it.

Will’s eyes scanned the letter quickly, his frown deepening with every line. This King of the humans was eloquent, Will would give him that.

“The humans are starving,” he mused aloud, a furrow developing between his brows.

To his right, Aiden snorted rudely, crossing his arms across his chest defensively. *“Good.”*

Will scowled at his cousin, chiding him softly. *“Aiden.”*

“You’ve only ever known peace with them, Will. But the wolves have had nothing but trouble from humans for years until we joined together with your kingdom. My pack has suffered greatly at their hands, their bows and their swords. Even now, even with your protection, they cut us down when we dare leave the safety of the Forest.” Aiden bristled, shaking himself before he continued. “Dragons as well. If your father had been around long enough to teach you your heritage you’d understand my lack of concern for those brutes. They call us beasts, but *they* are the true monsters.”

“How unfortunate my father died before he could pass along his prejudices, then.” Will dismissed, scanning the rest of the letter quickly. “The King wants to meet with me. He’s requested a private audience between the two of us and our most trusted advisors.” Will’s eyes immediately went to Aiden, the Alpha nearly hissing in disapproval.

“Absolutely not. No.”

“Are you my keeper as well as my cousin, now?” Will raised a brow at him, a smile playing against his lips.

“It’s a trap, Will. A ruse to lure your two strongest away from your people long enough for the humans to strike. I’m not your keeper, but I *am* your advisor, and I strongly *advise* you to stay as far away as possible from them and let them handle their own problems.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Will announced more than a little sarcastically, rising from his nest of branches and moss, filled with blankets knitted from animal furs and vines. His people had always provided for him, *nature* had always provided for them. What could it hurt to hear what the human King had to say?

Will looked to Beverly, clapping her on the shoulder and rubbing his cheek against her hair, scenting her. “Send a message back. Tell Hannibal Lecter I shall give him his meeting. A private meeting, just us and our seconds; if I sense more than two humans, I won’t come out. A week’s time, the night of the full moon.” Will knew the light of the full moon would provide his cousin with increased stamina and strength, filling him with even more energy than he was already blessed with.

“Yes, Alpha,” Bev replied, turning on her heel and sprinting back through the forest.

Aiden was seething, clearly holding his tongue though it was obviously difficult for him. “This is a mistake, cousin.” His eyes were nearly pleading, and it gave Will a moment’s pause.

“They may need our help, Aiden. We help those who need help. We always have.”

“I don’t like it.” Aiden tried one final time, nearly growling the words.

“I know.” Will acknowledged, his voice falling from his lips more solemn than intended. He flashed his fangs in a playful grin, suddenly desperate to lift the somber mood. “It’s a good thing you’re not the leader, huh?”

He could still feel the anxiety pouring from his kin, but Aiden *did* crack a smile at that, and Will took it for the win that it was.

Will had always loved the forest, felt most at peace in nature. As a hybrid with a Dragon father and a Shifter mother, Fae magic ran deeply into his bones, connecting him to the Earth and granting him bountiful gifts.

The woods were quiet unless one truly listened. Will could hear the sounds of insects scuttling through the underbrush, the flap of wings as birds flew through the topmost branches, chittering squirrels and the gentle, constant susurrous of the wind through the trees.

He was bathed in nothing but the light of the moon, his body bare as the breeze spilled over him and cooled his warm skin. Summer was coming to its end, but the strength of its warmth still clung to the night air.

A twig snapped from somewhere to his right, and he scented his cousin on the air. Aiden was a wolf, perfectly capable of moving silently and effortlessly if he chose to remain undetected, which meant he *wanted* Will to know he was following him.

Will huffed his annoyance, fluttered his wings and adjusted the bramble crown wrapped around his curved horns, disrupting some of the fireflies that liked to make it their home. “Come out, cousin. If you wanted to talk badly enough to follow me on my evening walk, let’s talk.”

Aiden came forward, on four legs in his wolf form rather than on his two human legs. Aiden was very close to his lineage, often preferring his wolf, especially in times of distress. Will knew Aiden meant well, knew the other man was only trying to protect their realm and his family, but Will couldn’t help the slight agitation he felt, even if he understood the *why.*

Will’s own mother, Roan, had settled into the Forest by choice when he bonded with Will’s father and they’d decided to have a child. Aiden’s pack had established themselves in a human settlement when Aiden had still been just a pup, but they were forced from their home when the humans had discovered their true nature. Aiden’s own mother, Will’s aunt, had been a casualty of the war that had been waged so mercilessly upon them.

Roan had taken Aiden in as though he was his own pup, the Omega more than happy to raise him alongside Will in his sister’s absence. But Aiden’s orphan status - technical though it was - had been a sore spot ever since, a constant reminder of the cruelty and intolerance of mankind.

Will himself had never experienced such cruelty. Had never, in fact, laid eyes on a human. He’d still only been a fledgling when the tentative treaty - and promise that ne’er the two groups should approach the other ever again - had finally been struck with the humans nearly a century prior. The Green Folk had been confined to the Forest ever since, and no human had ever had the courage or gall to venture anywhere near the edge of their territory. Until now.

He swallowed his frustration and quirked a wry smile down at Aiden, then turned and kept on. “Any conversation would be far more productive if the *both* of us could speak,” he pointed out. Aiden’s own annoyance radiated off his form, an extra layer wrapped warmly around him that Will could sense without even turning his full attention to his cousin’s aura. He had an inkling that Aiden’s inky black fur was bristled and standing on end in his agitation.

“I know you’re upset, but I’m not a telepath, Aiden,” Will reminded him. “I can only glean so much from you this way.”

He was pleased to sense his cousin’s form rippling beside him, the quiet of the night broken by a soft snarl and then the sound of another set of feet falling into step to his right.

“I don’t like this, Will.” Aiden wasted no time voicing his opinion, now that he *had* a voice. “You don’t know the humans like I do. They fear what they don’t understand; their instinct guides them to destroy it. And they don’t understand magic, or Fae, or any of it. They feared Dragons, once. Look at how that ended for *your* people.”

“Maybe I’m not so quick to assume *all* humans should be beholden to the actions of the *few,”* Will shot back serenely.

He knew Aiden, a creature of primal aggression and dominance didn’t understand Will’s peaceful instincts. Aiden hadn’t been raised around the Green Folk his entire life as Will had been, the howling of his Wolf nature dampened as Will’s Dragon nature had been by security and serenity. Perhaps it was foolish, but Will still hoped that someday the sharp edges of Aiden’s fangs and claws might be softened the way Will’s had been. He only needed to learn the safety of the Forest, and to trust in it.

“Your father *died* because of humans. Your mother is out risking his life to bring the packs together as one to help strengthen us. How can you betray them?”

“My father died because he was a bigoted man who killed indiscriminately and without mercy. It was only a matter of time before he killed the wrong person. His death was an unnecessary tragedy. If he’d been able to see past his own limits, past the borders of the forest, he might yet be alive today.” Will paused, but kept walking, drawing closer to the stream that ran diagonally across the entire woods. “An alliance with the humans could prove worthwhile; strengthen us just as much as furthering our relations with the other packs.”

Aiden scoffed, kicking at a loose rock along the path. “There won’t *be* any relations with the packs if you seek out the company of humans. Us Shifters have a long and bloody history with mankind that won’t be quickly forgotten. I may be their Alpha, but there’s only so much of the pack I can control.”

“I’m not asking you to forget, cousin. I’m asking you to *forgive.* The Fae, the Dragons, the Shifters, we’ve all lived too far removed from the rest of the world for too long. Perhaps it’s time we rejoined the realm, befriended the mortals. This King Hannibal... if he’s willing to go to such lengths to ensure the safety of his people, he must be a good man. I don’t see the harm in *trying,* Aiden.”

“Which is why you need *me,”* Aiden insisted. He reached out and tugged lightly at one of Will’s wings - an intimate gesture that few in the Forest would dare to perform. Will finally halted and turned toward his cousin with a sigh. *“I* see the harm. You’re too trusting, cousin. If this is all a deception, what then? The humans will have lured out and slaughtered our King, and then where will the Forest be?”

Will tossed him a soft but sardonic smile, placing a comforting hand on his cousin's shoulder. "Exactly where it is today, I imagine. The Forest never *needed* a King, Aiden, and I never asked to be one. What service do I perform that can't be replicated by any other of the Green Folk?"

"You're *Will,"* Aiden reminded him softly. "Beloved by all creatures and Fae."

"You're a flatterer," Will accused, an amused quirk twitching his lips. "And an exaggerator. Surely there's one or two out there that can't bear to suffer my existence."

"None," the Shifter volleyed solemnly, but with a smirk finally turning his lips up at the corners.

Hannibal had never been so close to the Forest before. He let himself relish just a little in the earthy scents originating from its depths, following the breeze that blew across his face and filled him with the desire to *run,* dig deep into the ground beneath his feet, and settle into the warmth of nature. He wondered if it was the magic of the Forest that compelled him so, or simply the novelty of the experience.

"Do you smell that?" Nigel interrupted Hannibal's pondering, pulling his attention away from the inky shadows that seemed to *leak* from the edges of the woods, making the trees appear to breathe in the dwindling light of pre-dusk.

Before Hannibal could reply, two creatures - for that was precisely how they appeared to Hannibal's relatively limited sensibilities - stepped from the darkness spilling across the moss-laden ground and his breath caught in his throat.

He could only assume the Dragon before him was the King of the Green Folk, leader of those found within the boundaries of the lush Forest behind him. His entire presence had an effortless air of regality, his movements confident and sure on the uneven earth as he approached, telegraphing his every step with his eyes locked on Hannibal.

The man had *wings,* juniper colored and lithe in appearance, falling elegantly from between his shoulders, draping him on either side of his back. Two obsidian horns curved up and back, both ending in dangerously sharp points. A crown of brambles and *fireflies* nestled loosely around them, settled daintily upon curls the color of fertile soil. There was a smirk on his cherry-kissed lips as his sea glass eyes flashed at him.

Hannibal cleared his throat, taking a step forward to meet the Dragon and his chosen second, the other man smaller in stature and younger, but obviously related to the King, the same rosy cheeks and soft curls not nearly where the likeness ended. He carried a banner with a wolf's head on one side and a Dragon on the other, flapping lazily in the wind.

When the startlingly beautiful creature before him tilted his head, seemingly waiting for him to speak, Hannibal blinked and cleared his throat. "Apologies, I've never seen a Dragon in person before." In all honesty, Hannibal hadn't even known there *were* any Dragons still alive.

His smile was soft and not at all scathing or cruel, his face open and honest. *Kind.* "There aren't many of us around these days."

"No thanks to *humans."* The man to his side muttered bitterly, clearly a sore spot for him. Hannibal wondered if the rumors were true and the Fair Folk often went nude, both of the men looking slightly uncomfortable in their simple attire. The King wore a pair of soft black boots, tawny breeches and a fern-green shirt made of a material Hannibal wasn't familiar with. His second was similarly dressed, lilac leggings that disappeared into supple black shoes paired with a blood-red blouse. He also had flowers strung through his curls, periwinkle and emerald green.

"Aiden," the King chided in a hiss, wings fluttering irritably as embarrassment stained his cheeks pink. It seemed familiar; a common conversation topic, perhaps.

"I'm sure we can skip through the formalities; our situation is dire. We hoped to request an arrangement with you and your people - an alliance, of sorts." Hannibal offered his hand, and the King took it, his handshake firm. Hannibal felt heat spread across his skin, as though he'd placed his hand too close to a roaring fire when his flesh touched the Dragon's. From the look in the other man's eye, he imagined the King had felt the same.

"By necessity," Nigel muttered darkly under his breath, taking a step closer as the Forest King's man did the same. The two mirrored each other flawlessly, stances feigning apathy, though ready to spring into action at any moment as they regarded each other with wary suspicion.

"Nigel," Hannibal warned, voice sharp and tone final. He released the other man's hand and returned to his position a few feet further apart. "I'm Hannibal, King of Rytas. I come to you, as my brother stated, though perhaps a bit uncouthly, out of desperate need. My people are starving. Our lands haven't been as fertile in recent harvests, and our crops haven't yielded enough yet for us to make it *to* the winter, let alone survive it."

"How is that our problem?" Aiden - the King had called him - groused, shifting agitatedly from foot to foot. He looked nearly ready to burst from his own skin.

The King caught Aiden's eyes and a silent conversation passed between the two of them, ending in Aiden scoffing loudly and crossing his arms.

"I apologize for my cousin; you say you've never seen a Dragon in person, well, we've never seen a *kind* human. I am Will, and though I do not call myself King of those that are free, I am their guardian."

Hannibal scented the air. Aiden's potent scent nearly overwhelmed him; flint and spice, with undertones of something more primal and feral than even his Alphan nature would suggest. Will, by contrast, didn't smell Alphan *or* Omegan, though he also didn't have the hollow void of scent that Betas possessed. He smelled of peat moss and the silt along a riverbank, like fertile earth and the first frost of winter, with a lingering smokiness that layered perfectly overtop the combination.

He put all of those realizations away for later review, including the clenching in his gut as he breathed in more of Will's scent. "Will, I am loath to intrude upon your peace here; if the situation weren't so serious we wouldn't ask. Can you help us?"

"I imagine it must be, if you broke an eighty-year-old treaty agreement to contact us," Will mused, though his tone was distinctly lacking in rebuke. He tilted his head as he thought, the bramble crown caught in his curls shifting with the action; some of the fireflies that had lit upon it took to the air around the King's head, glowing softly and circling lazily until they deemed their home stable enough to return to.

Nigel bristled at his side, always quick to find criticism in the words of others. He could hardly be blamed for this trait, having faced the scorn and contempt as a male Omega at Court, let *alone* in a royal line. If it hadn't been for Hannibal, Nigel might have been cast out of the Lecter family altogether as soon as he'd presented. "The isolation agreement was put into place for *human* protection," he rumbled gruffly. "Our right to break it if we want to."

Will's discerning gaze slipped to Nigel, and as his eyes passed over the Omega Hannibal had the distinct feeling that he was seeing something no one else was. "Was it only human lives that were lost in the Great War, then?"

"A war *you* fucking started!" Nigel snarled, taking an angry step forward.

Aiden's answering growl was fierce, his fangs bared and corded muscles trembling as he positioned himself in front of Will protectively. Hannibal and Will's corresponding reactions only added to the disturbance of the still evening, Will gritting out a stern *that's enough,* while Hannibal chided *that's hardly helpful, Nigel.*

Will placed a hand on his cousin's shoulder and eased him aside, palm slipping up to apply a few soothing strokes to the Alpha's neck, effectively calming him somewhat, though his jaw remained clenched tight, hard gaze flashing red as he stared Nigel down. Will, to his credit, did not appear ruffled at all by the outburst, nor did he seem offended by Nigel's accusation. In fact, his soft smile was almost *fond* as he turned back to Hannibal's brother, amusement dancing in his eyes.

"By *you,* I must assume you are referring to Dragons in general, as at the time I was still merely a pup on my mother's breast. Would have been quite an achievement for an infant, I must say." One of Will's slim shoulders twitched in an aborted shrug. "I fear we've meandered from our intended conversation. I *do* wish to help your people, but there is still the concern of *how."*

Nigel gestured to the lush greenery behind the pair of creatures, running his mouth before Hannibal could scarcely open his. They would need to discuss his behavior on the journey back to Rytas.

"Looks like you've got pretty ample fucking supplies."

A sharp bark of laughter drew both men's attention to Aiden; the Fae's demeanor had shifted completely, a wide grin stretching his lips and his eyes shining with mirth. "You hungry? Let me grab you a bite -"

“Humans can’t consume food of the Fae,” Will cut in softly, and Hannibal couldn’t help but feel as if there was an undertone of regret in the announcement. “It’s imbued with our magic. To eat it would invite madness of the body and mind to any who don’t possess magic of their own.”

“Is there nothing you can do?”

Will’s gaze slid back to Hannibal, and a shiver spilled down his spine under their regard. “We can go to the source. Encourage a boon in the harvest. The magic won’t affect the crops if we focus it to nurture soil instead.”

“Leave the Forest,” Aiden added flatly, his gaze seething once more, though this time directed at his King. “Absolutely not.”

“Could you guarantee our safety if we did?” Will ignored his cousin completely, earnest eyes still locked on Hannibal. “Understand, I will not command any of my people to leave the safety of the Forest. But I *will* call for volunteers.”

Hannibal felt the first tentative tendrils of hope bloom in his chest, and in his desperation to find a solution, he was tempted to make any promise he needed to. His better sense prickled at the back of his mind, and while he realized it may be detrimental to his cause, he knew that he needed to be honest.

“It may not be a warm reception,” he conceded. “Great mystery surrounds your kind, and people so often fear what they don’t understand.” Aiden shot Will an indecipherable look at that, making a short gesture in Hannibal’s direction. “I would offer my own Kingsguard to accompany any who come to our aid, men loyal to me above all others. And *obedient,”* he added as Nigel rumbled with a low growl next to him.

“Will, you can’t be serious?” Aiden’s fury was a palpable thing, his eyes flashing a deep, Alphan red.

“Of course I won’t ask my people to participate in something I wouldn’t do myself. If nothing else, Hannibal, I will reconvene with you again here in seven days.” He looked to his cousin with a curious expression on his face. “Hopefully, I won’t be alone.”

“I will be here, Will. And in the fields with you, if that would be agreeable.” Hannibal saw Nigel’s jaw tense and commended him internally for staying his tongue this time. His brother did so have trouble with tact.

“I’ll call the Folk together immediately. The Forest is slow-moving, it will most likely take the entire timeto come to a decision,” he smiled, a secret, knowing smirk as though he and Hannibal had been privy to a lifetime of memories together rather than only having just met.

He gestured vaguely at Aiden and the man scowled but huffed his agreement, shifting into the form of a large wolf mere feet away. Hannibal had heard tales of neighboring realms having fought with, traded with, and ultimately warring openly with the shifters, but again had never met one in person. The wolf was massive, easily standing up to Hannibal’s hip in this form, his fur shaggy and black as midnight.

The creature let out a deep, vibrating howl, a sound that called to something ancient and primal buried deeply within Hannibal's bones, his body nearly moving forward without his own thought or control. He shook himself free of it, the sound still echoing in the halls of his mind.

"It was good to meet you, Hannibal. Though I wish it had been under less sorrowful circumstances. I will send word to you soon."

And just like that, Will and Aiden disappeared into the murky black of the woods behind them, Aiden's howl still reverberating in Hannibal's chest long after they were gone.

A week felt more like a year and simultaneously like no time at all. It had been longer than he cared to consider since Hannibal had felt anything akin to anticipation, and he had to admit that it was a novel experience. There wasn't usually much to get worked up over, after all; there had been peace between the neighboring kingdoms and his own for several decades, and apart from the hardship that the recent drought had wrought upon them, life had seemed to move as swiftly and easily as ever.

But, standing at the edge of the Forest as the late summer sun began its lazy descent toward the horizon, Hannibal couldn't deny a restless sort of excitement was burning just beneath his skin, making him feel the need to fidget uncharacteristically. Beside him, Nigel stood tense, sanguine eyes locked sharply upon the treeline, and his right hand resting warily against the pommel of the sword strapped to his left hip, ready to burst into action - defensive or *offensive* - as needed.

He stiffened as two shapes, somehow far more familiar to him than they should be due to one particular shape's frequency in his recent dreams, split away from the shadowed treeline. Hannibal fought the chill that threatened to spill down his spine and kept his eyes on their approach. Aiden was already in his wolf form, large and black, and prowling with the easy slink of a predator that simply *knew* it was superior. Will followed closely behind, his green, leathery wings relaxed and nearly dragging on the ground, though this time he was nude, his body devoid of the clothing he'd worn previously; he seemed far more at ease without the ill-fitting garments to tug at.

Hannibal was distinctly aware only the two of them stepped away from the Forest. He felt a bold, instinctive part of him long to question Will about this, to demand to know what became of the rest of the Fae, but he resisted. Instead, he pinned a congenial smile to his lips and closed the distance between them by another step.

"Thank you for coming."

Will gave a nod as, beside him, Aiden let out a huff and shook his great head and shoulders. "We are eight, collectively. Though the others don't feel comfortable traveling with humans. They've assured me they will meet us at the borders of Rytas by midday tomorrow. Is this agreeable?"

Hannibal couldn't stop his gaze from tracking to the line of trees over Will's shoulder, sensing that there were far more Fae present than just the two stood boldly before him, or even the six others he promised would join. "I will humbly and gratefully accept any aid your people wish to extend."

Will gave a curt nod to that, unaffected by the regal charm Hannibal exuded into his words. "Mount your beasts," he instructed, head dipping to the horses at their sides. "The four of us may actually travel swiftly enough to arrive in time to catch some sleep."

Hannibal opened his mouth to respond, froze as he watched Will's form shiver, his body curling in on itself as his wings fluttered and then flared out suddenly. His tan flesh seemed to melt from his frame, even as it grew three times in size, revealing the iridescent sheen of scales tinted the same green as his leathery wings.

The insides of his wings were the molten red of hot iron, shot through with veins of gold. Nigel cursed beside him as the King of the Forest dug his clawed feet into the earth and propelled himself into the air on his sturdy legs. He hovered lazily above them while they collected themselves.

Hannibal and Nigel took the cue, tearing their eyes from the breathtaking sight and mounting their horses hastily. He was surprised to find their mounts didn't falter or fret at the presence of the dragon, or the wolf as Aiden stalked closer to them, perhaps sensing that these creatures posed them no threat.

Aiden tilted his great, black head in their direction before bounding off in the direction of Rytas, the air billowing around them as Will's impressive wings flapped above them and he took off as well. The brothers shared one surprised, awed glance, quick as a breath, and then urged their horses to their swiftest gallop.

The heart of Rytas consisted mostly of a sprawling city, with a great castle of stone rising up in the center of it. The lands surrounding the walls fortifying the city had been put to use as fields, though from his view in the sky Will couldn't see many crops to speak of for this time of year. The situation appeared to be as bleak as King Hannibal had claimed.

They arrived midway through the night, and Will dipped down to land at the southern gate where the two humans and Aiden awaited him. The horses startled as he settled onto the earth, Hannibal and Nigel still attempting to calm them when Will shifted out of his full form. He stepped forward slowly, reaching a hand out to each beast until their nervous whinnies ceased and their restless trotting settled.

"That's a neat trick," Nigel sounded nearly scathing, Will's lips turning down at the contempt so clearly layered in the other man's voice.

Hannibal gave his brother a look before turning to Will, a smile on his face. "We can have clothing brought out to you and your cousin if you so wish."

Will looked to Aiden, no longer a wolf, but a man. He knew humans were partial to clothing, and, though it wasn't the way of the Green Folk, Will wanted to ensure everyone felt comfortable while they were in Hannibal's kingdom.

"We will both take long tunics, no breeches. And if you could accommodate my wings I'd be obliged." A woman climbed down from the guard post along the gate, taking the reins of both horses in hand and leading the beasts away towards what Will assumed must be the stables.

"Your lands are beautiful," Will continued, cutting through the growing silence as they awaited their clothing. "I did notice the fields, though. It is as you say; they have grown nearly infertile from overuse and the drought your people experienced last season."

"But you think you can help?" Hannibal stepped closer, a concerned furrow to his brow.

Will smiled wide and openly kind. "I'm certain of it."

The woman from the gate returned, this time with two tunics bundled in her arms along with two pairs of soft slippers, one in a muted gold and the other the color of oxblood. Her cheeks flamed as her eyes moved swiftly from Will's nude form to look steadfastly at the ground.

"Thank you, Georgia. You may return to your watch," Hannibal took the clothing with a nod, passing them over to Will. Their arms touched, for just a moment, and Will again felt the spark of flames running along the surface of his skin where their flesh met.

This time, he looked into Hannibal's eyes, saw a dark hunger there that awakened something deep in his own chest, the feeling as though someone had stoked the ember surrounding his heart. He felt it in his throat, in the clench of his stomach. The urge to step closer and scent the man standing before him, a man *clearly* meant to be his mate, was overwhelming.

Will accepted the bundle with a soft *thank you* and assessed the shirt. The tunic would cover his back completely, but it looked to be intentionally oversized for him, and the front held a slit from the collar intended to be laced closed with the thread of leather woven through it. He pulled the length of cord out completely, binding it around his wrist as he had no other place to dispose of it, and then slipped the shirt on backward. The material gaped open with nothing in place to seal it, and it settled just below where his wings protruded from his shoulder blades.

He tugged the slippers on next, toes twitching and feet flexing at the unfamiliar feeling of being bound. He couldn't help his restless shifting, the barrier between his skin and the earth a wholly uncomfortable sensation. A glance to his right found Aiden looking far more comfortable than Will felt, although Aiden had once lived his life among humans, young as he was, and the concept of clothing was not quite as novel for him as it was for Will.

When they were appropriately clad - by *human* standards, at least - Hannibal and Nigel led them through the quiet streets of the sleeping city. Will heard commotion in the distance, but they drew further and further away from it with every step. When the sound pulled Aiden's attention as well, Will heard Nigel mutter something about *brothels* - whatever *those* were - and no-good drunks. The humans seemed at ease, at least, and Aiden must have had a better

idea of what Nigel spoke of than Will did, because the tension in his shoulders melted away at the explanation.

The castle was enormous - the biggest structure Will had ever laid eyes upon by *far.* It stretched up and up and up, and the closer they drew to the building, the farther back Will had to crane his head, until they arrived at the main gate itself and Will could no longer even see where it ended. It was cold and imposing, left Will feeling uneasy and suffocated as soon as they stepped into the depths of it.

Some of the corridors they passed through were spacious, with ceilings nearly as tall as some of the shorter tree canopies in the Forest. Once they reached the stone steps leading up into the greater heights of the castle the way grew narrow and cramped, however, and Will was forced to tuck his wings tight to his body.

Hannibal and Nigel were only a breath in front of them, and in the enclosed space all Will could seem to feel - beyond the invasive chill leaching from the unfeeling stone around them - was the electric heat pouring off Hannibal's body; all he could smell was the thick, spiced musk of a virile Alpha, Hannibal's own scent like cloves and nectar, the earthy scent of dew-drenched grass and freshly turned earth.

Hannibal showed Will and Aiden to a space he deemed as theirs - for as long as they needed - and then the two humans departed with a promise to meet again come morning. The door closed, heavy and loud behind them, and the first sensation to flood through Will, ringing mockingly within the depths of his soul, was *trapped.*

He bared his teeth at the stone around him, immediately taking up a restless pace as he strode the length of the room from one side to the other. It was a large enough space to unfurl his wings, at least, and lucky for it, as they'd started to *ache* with the effort of being hemmed in so oppressively for so long. Now they twitched and fluttered irritably, just as Will's head did as it whipped from side to side, constantly assessing the distance between the walls.

He was certain the space was *shrinking* somehow, though logically he knew that stone could not move on its own. His constant pacing had his bramble crown slipping to and fro within his curls; the fireflies that found themselves without a stable place to perch buzzed in irritable circles around his head.

"Will." Aiden's voice finally broke through the cacophony Will's panicked thoughts ringing in his mind, and he turned to his cousin in a state that was equal parts sorrowful, agitated, and betrayed.

"You were right. This was a terrible idea. They've lured us in and imprisoned us, and I allowed us to walk *right* into their trap."

"Will, breathe," Aiden insisted, and it was the *amusement* in his tone that finally snapped fully into Will's awareness.

"You think this is funny *?* I'm being held *captive* by my own *mate,* and you think to *laugh?"*

Any humor Aiden may have possessed fled him at Will's words. He grew somber, and stepped forward to crowd against Will, nuzzling their cheeks together reassuringly as he scented him. "Firstly," Aiden murmured, pulling away and striding to the exit. He gave a tug upon the door and it opened a crack with a protesting groan. "We are not *trapped.* The door can be opened, we can leave whenever we wish. Calm down, cousin." He pushed the door closed once more and paced closer to where Will stood in the center of the room. "Now what's all this about your *mate?"*

Will was comforted by the sight of an accessible exit. The insufferably small hole set into the wall let in only a sliver of the night sky and a teasing gust of crisp, moon-soaked air. It was just enough to taunt his wings into craving the ability to spread fully and take flight, sagging in defeat at Aiden's stern scowl and Alphan red eyes.

"There's no denying it," Will admitted. "I could sense it the moment I saw him, knew it from our first touch. I don't know how or why; all I know is that Hannibal is my mate. My *true* mate."

Aiden looked unhappy with the revelation, but Will was far too concerned with maintaining his breathing to argue. "I need some air."

Will was at the door before Aiden seemed to remember himself, shaking his mind free of whatever thoughts had plagued him. He was at Will's side in seconds, a gentle hand wrapped around Will's wrist where his hand rested against the doorknob. "Will, wait. We should talk about this."

"There is nothing to discuss, Aiden. I know you don't approve, but I'm incapable of interfering with fate. Hannibal's people may one day be my own, might be *our people.* Which is all the more reason for us to help them. And I can't help them cooped up here."

"You can't go alone. Let me accompany you."

"I know you worry, dear cousin, but it is for naught. We are safe here, and someone should be outside to greet our people when they arrive."

"I don't think it's wise to wander this place alone, Will," Aiden argued again, but Will was already shaking him off, tugging the heavy door open and slipping through the gap.

"Stay here, Aiden." Will hated that it was a command, hated that Aiden was stubborn enough to force one from him.

He slipped through the stone halls silent as the wind, grateful for the flickering sconces that lit the way and desperately attempting to retrace the steps they'd taken through the castle. He was certain if he could find his way back down the steps that he could find the main entrance.

It would be easier to navigate the maze of corridors, he wagered, if his mate's scent didn't surround him at every turn. Hannibal obviously spent a great deal of time in this area of the castle; the very stones around Will seemed to contain the human's essence, constantly teasing him with a trace strong enough to follow for a moment before it vanished altogether. Until

finally it didn't, but only continued to grow stronger, took the shape of a trail that a deep, primal part of Will knew was *fresh,* that would lead him *home.*

His hunt was rewarded as he turned a corner to find his mate, a purr rumbling through him even as he squeaked out a soft sound of dismay at the sight of his retreating back. Hannibal turned at the sound, halting as Will approached.

"Will." Hannibal seemed surprised to see him, a furrow of confusion between his brows. Will couldn't help but notice how lovely the other man was, his features finely crafted and angular, his lips a blushed pink barely concealing bone-white teeth. His eyes were darker in the low light of the candles burning in the wall sconce beside him, a pomegranate red, the color of iron-rich blood.

For a moment, Will stood before his mate and completely forgot the reason he'd abandoned the chambers he'd been provided. His fingers itched to reach out and *touch,* his instincts compelling him to move closer and scent his mate until he smelled like Will. His wings fluttered as he willed the rest of his body still, and the cool brush of rough stone of the wall was enough to remind him where he was, enough to bring on another wave of that unpleasantly cramped and suffocating sensation.

"Apologies, King Hannibal. It seems the indoors aren't agreeing with me overly well. I think it best I wait outside for the remaining members of our enclave. Do you have any suggestions for a safe place to nest for the night?"

Hannibal's confusion only grew for several seconds before a small smile overtook his lips and he offered Will the crook of his elbow. "Just Hannibal, please. And I have just the place."

The King's Garden was Hannibal's most prized possession. He tended it himself, had planted nearly every tree, plant, and flower currently growing within its walls. He'd even added a small herb garden along the walls, hanging baskets overflowing with the earthy smell of fresh herbs and spices.

Bringing Will to this place felt far more intimate than their familiarity would suggest, but Hannibal couldn't deny the desire to have Will know him fully, to know Will in turn. He'd felt it in their touch, had known it in his bones that Will was *his.* His true mate, the one perfectly crafted for him.

The Garden was located in the innermost courtyard of the castle, only accessible through a private door in Hannibal's rooms. He led Will through his study, his bedroom - where he spared only a brief glance to the massive bed taking up a large space in the center of the room - and then through the door to the gardens.

Will's eyes grew wide, the blue sparkling like water under the moonlight that spilled across the courtyard, washing everything in a milky glow.

“My private gardens. I’ve tended it myself for many years; it wasn’t always like this. My mother had an affinity for narcissus, hyacinth, and clover. I’ve added much since her death, a new plant each year. It’s one of my favorite places to escape, to come and think when the rest of the castle feels too loud.”

“It’s beautiful,” Will’s voice was honest, thick with emotion as he wandered around the space, touching flower petals and tree branches and smiling widely. The plants seemed to respond to his presence, appeared to all but reach out for his touch. Hannibal could understand the sentiment; they’d only touched a few brief moments of time and already Hannibal was ravenous for it. “Thank you, Hannibal. Are you certain you don’t mind my occupying your private space? I don’t want to intrude.”

“You look so at peace here already, Will. How could I not encourage you to stay?” Will’s wings fluttered in what Hannibal could only consider joy, his entire countenance lighter and happier. He was beautiful here, beautiful always, but especially within his element.

“Thank you,” Will said again, this time in a whisper as his cheeks flushed a rosy and inviting shade of pink. Hannibal realized with a start that he’d said that out loud, had called Will beautiful. He couldn’t find it within himself to be embarrassed at the slip. In all his life, he couldn’t recall ever gazing upon a more breathtaking sight than the one before him; to imply the enchanting creature that was Will Graham was anything *other* than indescribably beautiful would be madness.

Having been given express permission to make himself at home, Will was quick to free his feet from the slippers that clad them, a soft sigh and purr of contentment rumbling from him as he flexed his toes and seemed to relish in the sensation of grass and dirt against his skin. He beamed down at his feet as though he’d thought he’d never feel them again, wings stretching their considerable span in the open space.

Hannibal hadn’t considered how uncomfortable it might be for someone of the Forest to be cooped up indoors while in unfamiliar territory. Territory that had, until still very recently within their history, been considered enemy lands.

He could feel the gaze of Will heavy upon him - strange, how in tune with the Dragon he seemed to be whenever he was near - and reined in his own wandering eyes, hoping Will wouldn’t find his scrutiny rude. He must not have, if the easy smile that painted his lips was anything to judge by.

“I’m certain I’ll be much more comfortable out here. I must admit, I was not prepared to miss the Forest as much as I do.”

Hannibal bid him a small smile of his own. “No one expects to miss home until they leave it.” He considered reminding Will he would only be away for a short while, in any case, but knew somehow that the words would taste bitter on his tongue and opted to leave them unspoken. “Now, I believe it’s well past the time that we both found our rest. I’ll seek you out come morning, and we can meet your people at the gate.”

Will nodded his thanks once more, barely waiting for Hannibal to turn away before he was hastily divesting himself of his tunic.

When Hannibal returned to his bedroom, he found himself treading not to his bed, but to the window that looked out upon his garden. He spied Will pacing languidly from one tree to the next, until finally he settled beneath the one closest to the castle wall - the one in direct line of sight to Hannibal's door and window - and then curled into a ball in the grass, his wings stretching and fluttering once more before cocooning tightly around his form.

Hannibal slid onto the bench before the window, stretching his legs the length of it and resting his back against the wall, his gaze never leaving the moonlight-dappled creature just outside.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will's morning had been a far easier adjustment than the previous night. When he'd awoken in Hannibal's private gardens, the King had been waiting for him with a cup of herbal tea and freshly cooked breakfast.

It had all been a ploy to soften Will up enough to convince him to replace his clothing, something Will did with more than a little complaining. It felt so *restrictive,* the tunic falling to his knees and framing his wings with scratchy fabric. He did decline the slippers, though they'd been soft against his skin, they were an uncomfortable barrier to the earth.

Aiden and Nigel had been livid about their absenteeism, Aiden nearly beside himself with worry that Will had gone missing. They were all gathered in the hall closest to Hannibal's private rooms, Aiden and Nigel taking turns yelling at their leaders, when they were interrupted.

"Your Grace," one of Hannibal's Kingsguard appeared beside them, a large, bulky man with dark, sun-warmed skin. Even if Will hadn't been able to sense the distress pouring off him in waves, it was evident enough on his face. "I'm sorry to interrupt. I've just been informed my wife's health is wavering terribly today. I know I'm needed with the Green Folk -"

"You must go to her, of course," Hannibal soothed the man's ragged nerves. "We'll make do without you. Please send Bella my well wishes, Jack."

"What ails her?" Will's curiosity perhaps got the better of him; the guard seeming momentarily perplexed that a strange Dragon creature was speaking to him directly.

His gaze darted to Hannibal as if awaiting permission to speak, doing so only after his King gave a slight nod. "She's skin and bones, her color pale. Some days she has little to no appetite and suffers from coughing fits of such length that she can scarcely breathe afterward."

Will thought for a moment before replying. "Give her a tea mixture of elderberries, valerian root and ginger root. Perhaps some honey for a touch of sweetness and to help soothe the throat."

Jack's confusion only grew at the offered solution, and he excused himself again, saying nothing further to Will, and disappeared around the stone corner of the interior hall.

Before Aiden could start in on him again, Will's skin prickled, the magic of his people sparking along his arms like a warm bath. "They're here." Will drifted away, smiling when he heard Aiden grumbling as he followed just to his right, Nigel and Hannibal not far behind.

The Fae had been expected, of course, and Hannibal's orders, had been followed implicitly with only a few skeptical looks from his staff. They arrived at the Southern Gate to find the rest of Will's party awaiting their King with expressions ranging from nervous uncertainty to downright irritable frustration as a few of them shifted uncomfortably in the clothing provided for them.

Like Will, the entire group had declined donning the slippers. The sun-scorched earth must be warm beneath their feet, even though the sun had barely crested over the horizon, and would grow warmer still throughout the day; Hannibal wondered briefly if they would come to find themselves uncomfortable without the protection of footwear, or if perhaps their ilk had a higher tolerance for such things.

Hannibal could recall a hazy memory of himself as a boy, standing at the opening of a traveling menagerie. The silken tents had been filled with all sorts of exotic flora and fauna, including curious and intriguing *people.* Hannibal had asked his father if it was right to gawk at people so, just for being unique.

His father had been an Alpha motivated by greed and power, only slightly tempered by the love of Hannibal's sweet, kind mother. He'd told Hannibal that day that anything was right and everything was permitted for the right price.

Even at eight, Hannibal had already been stubborn enough to disagree, and his mother had smiled her sugarcane smile and guided him outside to walk back to the castle. That was when she'd truly started to teach Hannibal how to be *yielding* rather than hard. How to bend so that he did not break. And how to treat others with love and respect, without malice. Every scrap of kindness Hannibal could claim wasn't his own at all, it was a remnant from his mother's patient teachings.

So now, with a collection of half a dozen creatures of various shapes and sizes spread out in a semi-circle around him, he couldn't help but smile. He knew it wasn't as warm or as welcoming as his mother's had always been, but he hoped it was *something.*

"Thank you all for coming," Hannibal addressed everyone gathered, meeting the eyes of each individual. They were vast in their differences, from a small humanoid creature no taller than Hannibal's knees, to a man with the torso and head of a man, though he had two horns twining from his hair, and the furred, strong legs of a horse; a Satyr, his memories surfaced helpfully.

There was a girl dressed in nothing but flowers and vines, her hair a collection of greens and browns, made of what appeared to be leaves. The rest of those gathered seemed outwardly human, though Hannibal suspected they were shifters of a sort like Aiden and Will. And all of them with their own unique magic.

They all looked unsure, but nodded their greetings and, as expected, their troupe was met with mixed reactions from the villagers. Hannibal was pleased to note there were no openly hostile looks, most simply bewildered.

Hannibal and Will led the brigade, Nigel and Aiden following closely on their heels with Hannibal's Kingsguard bringing up the rear. One by one they trekked to each field and farm,

explaining the purpose of the Fae's visit and assuring the farmers of their good intentions before leaving one of the Green Folk to weave their magic into the dirt along with one of Hannibal's soldiers behind to protect them.

"Shouldn't have let Crawford go," Nigel rumbled just behind him as they watched the last member of their party, the Satyr, stride into the barren field and promptly crouch down to sink his hands into the earth, assessing the soil. "We're short a guard for this one now."

Hannibal gave an unconcerned twitch of his head as he felt the statement draw Will's eyes to him. "You can stay behind. I'll accompany Will to the final farm."

"The *fuck* I will," Nigel snarled. "No fucking way I'm letting you run off without me with *two* strangers at your back."

Hannibal turned to regard his brother, found his fangs bared and body poised to attack as though he'd rather knock Hannibal into the dirt than allow him to continue on without him. He was just about to berate his kin for the inappropriate hostility when Will's soft voice sounded behind him.

"Aiden will stay as well. Then your King won't be outnumbered."

The wolf in question pinned his own King with a concerned look, but whatever passed through Will's sea-glass eyes when their gazes met tempered the Alpha's impending denial.

"Fine," Aiden huffed, crossing his arms nearly petulantly across his chest.

Nigel looked just as thrilled as the shifter at the prospect of company, and Hannibal couldn't help but lean closer to Will as they turned away to quietly question his decision. "Are you sure those two will be alright on their own?"

Will's eyes, shining crystalline blue in the afternoon sun, flicked over his shoulder to the pair before he turned his back upon them fully, a private, amused smile curling his lips. "They'll be fine."

Hannibal directed Will in the direction of their final destination, suddenly hyper aware the two of them were alone - at *last* - for the first time since early that morning. His mind buzzed with a dozen questions and he longed to learn everything about Will inside and out.

"Your kingdom is beautiful. I never expected to leave the Forest, and certainly not to enter the realm of men."

"So often our vision is so blinded by what we know that we cannot conceive of anything beyond it," Hannibal pointed out. "There can be beauty in the unknown - even, sometimes, in that which frightens us - if we only allow ourselves to see it."

A soft hum of agreement sounded from Will, the Dragon's wings fluttering at his back. "You'd find beauty in the Forest, I think. If you could see it the way I do. A proper visit."

Hannibal's gaze slid to the creature beside him, something warm and bright swelling in his chest at the words. "That sounded an awful lot like an invitation, Will," he teased softly.

Will's eyes glinted mischievously when they turned toward him, his eyebrow ticking up as a sly smirk quirked his lips. "Did it?"

Hannibal's heart started to beat just a little bit harder and he returned Will's smile as they stopped in front of the farm.

They walked along the edge of the castle walls several hours later, brows heavy with sweat from a hard day of labor. "I want to apologize for my people's gawking, it's rather unbecoming of them. I make no excuses, but they've never experienced anything quite like you in their lives. It's been a long time since any human in Rytas has seen any of the Fair Folk." Hannibal offered his arm to Will, and Will smiled as he took it, their skin tingling where it touched, even beneath the fabrics of their tunics.

Hannibal's voice was so earnest, and Will believed he meant no harm and truly thought the best of his people. While Will still didn't feel fully at ease in the human settlement, Hannibal's assurances did much to soothe his worries. "Think nothing of it, King Hannibal. I'm sure we must appear rather odd to your people who've lived their entire lives without magic. I can't imagine it."

"Just Hannibal, please." Hannibal's smile was infectious, pulling Will's lips up right along with it. He couldn't believe how hard and how fast he'd fallen for this man. Of course he'd heard the stories of soul sparks, but he'd never placed much stock in them. He felt more at ease with Hannibal than he could explain any other way, as though they'd always known one another.

"Well, *Just Hannibal.* Show me more of your world. What's your favorite place besides your little secret garden?" Will's words were teasing, but his desire was honest. He wanted to know more about this man who would potentially be his mate. He wanted to experience the world through his eyes.

Those amber eyes lit up at the challenge, and he turned them swiftly, guiding them away from the castle wall and out towards a small hill Will couldn't see over. They walked in companionable silence for several minutes, the wind gently rustling through the taller grasses along their path and the sun shining high over their heads.

"When I came to you that day I could never have expected we would be here, now. Seeing this all together." Hannibal commented, and Will squeezed his arm gently with his hand.

"Did you think me cruel enough to turn you away in your time of most desperate need? Or did you simply think I wouldn't find you interesting enough to converse with outside of the necessities?" Will could see Hannibal look at him from the corner of his eye, the other man's gaze trained on Will's face until the Dragon smiled broadly.

At the sight, Hannibal laughed, a pure and honest sound. The truth was, Will knew precisely what Hannibal had meant, he'd felt it himself. He wouldn't call it love, not just yet, but he already had such a regard for Hannibal, especially after his kindness the night before.

Hannibal crested the hill mere moments before Will, and Will was so fascinated with the expression on the other man's face that it took him several more seconds before he looked out into the valley below, an uneven ring of massive, ancient stones set into the earth.

Will gasped, his breath rushing out of him as he felt the magic beneath his toes, snaking up his legs and dispersing through his body; the sudden attunement he felt with the area sent a full-bodied shiver through him, his wings trembling and flexing as the urge to spread them wide swept through him. He could see the fine hairs along Hannibal's nape standing on end as well, magic strong and thick enough in the air and in the earth to even impact a human. "This place -" Will began just as Hannibal started speaking.

"My mother used to bring me here when I was a boy, sometimes during the day and other times to bathe under the light of the moon. She believed we could all benefit from being more connected to the earth and sky."

"She sounds like a beautiful soul. What happened to her?" Will asked gently, squeezing his hand along Hannibal's arm supportively.

"My parents both were taken from us along with my young sister during what was meant to be a peace talk with the neighboring kingdom of Tamsi; long at odds with our own. Nigel and I were only spared from the treachery because we'd been called to aid in settling disputes between some of the farmers at the western edge of our lands. We were fifteen years at the time, well at the age that our father expected us to be capable of handling such affairs of our kingdom. It only made sense to leave us behind."

His voice rang out clear and strong as he spoke of the tragedy, but Will could sense the pain and trauma that echoed from Hannibal as he recalled that portion of his life, could taste it on his tongue, bitter and acidic, as though he'd bitten into rotten fruit.

Will was struck with the overwhelming desire to touch Hannibal, to wrap arms and wings around him and soothe him, absorb his pain. He was left nearly breathless with the sensation, unable to form words as it was struck home that Hannibal was *his*.

"I'm sorry you lost your family in such a gruesome way," Will told him, his chest *aching* from the discontent that shifted through Hannibal. *His mate* . He was Will's mate; how could he possibly be anything else? He brought his hand to wrap around Hannibal's own, squeezing his fingers in a gentle, supportive caress before pulling apart again.

"Lost implies fault to the owner," Hannibal corrected softly. "Our family was stolen from us in the most dishonorable sense imaginable. Slaughtered. Like *pigs."*

"It's not for me to speak on," Will began hesitantly, his eyes trained before them on the ancient sacred circle so he needn't look at Hannibal, "But I must admit my surprise that you've not sought out your revenge. All my life I've been taught that humans were violent, confrontational creatures. It gladdens my soul to know that you have resisted responding in kind, despite the heartache you've faced."

"My advisor is King Mason's sister. Fled to Rytas when her own family disowned her. She...was not what they had hoped nor expected their daughter to be. Despite the rift, she

feels love for her family yet. And as I consider her one of my own, it would only harm both of us to seek petty vengeance over matters long since past."

Will finally turned toward Hannibal then, reaching out to clasp his other hand and blinking up into his gaze earnestly. "Justice for your family could never be considered petty, Hannibal. But I respect the stance you are attempting to take. Admire it, even. In the Forest disputes are settled with far less bloodshed than the mortal plane sees, and it's refreshing to know there are still humans out there that cherish the value of life."

Hannibal's gaze finally left Will's, pulled out across the verdant space around them. "We would have lessons here, my mother and I. Sometimes Nigel would come along, but we knew from quite young that I would someday be King so she spent more time on me, I think. To help me become a better man than my father had been. You asked my favorite place in all of Rytas, well this is it."

"This place is brimming with magic. I can feel it in the soil and cascading from the stones," Will observed, and Hannibal's eyes were drawn back to him immediately, a furrow of confusion between his brows.

"Magic? There haven't been any magic wielders or Fae in Rytas for decades. Why would there be magic here?"

"All magic flows from the same source, but it has branching rivers, little pockets that sometimes swell up and imbue a place. Fae are often drawn to such places. This one is quite strong; it's a surprise that you've had so few Fair Folk here."

There was a pause as Will looked out over the rolling hills, his gaze settling back on the stone formation surrounding them. "Perhaps you have and you've just been unaware of it. We don't all look obviously not human," Will continued, smirking and winking playfully as the furrow between Hannibal's brows loosened at his jesting.

"Does this place bring you a sense of home whilst so far away? If so, I am all the gladder I showed it to you."

Will couldn't help himself, he leaned forward to press a soft, gentle kiss to Hannibal's cheek, chaste and quick. Will wanted to taste the soft, nearly silent gasp the kiss drew from Hannibal's lips; wanted to stay in this moment for far longer than would be permitted for them.

Even as he thought it, they could hear sounds far off in the distance, the sounds of the city and the surrounding villages slowly ending their day. They would need to return soon to help acclimate everyone to their new situation.

"We should get back," Will said in lieu of an answer, the smile still warm on his face. He watched concern flit across Hannibal's features and took his hand, squeezing their fingers together. "I love this place, Hannibal. And I would very much like to return to it again."

Hannibal's smile was brilliant enough to rival the setting sun.

By the end of the second week in Rytas, Will felt the desire to sleep in his nest and the nearly equally overwhelming desire to bring Hannibal to the Forest to show the Alpha his home. He'd grown accustomed to the castle, having crafted a temporary nest in the tranquil peace of the King's Garden, but he longed to scent his own nest, and to see his people.

Nigel had adjusted fairly well to Will's presence, and the continued inhabitants from his enclave, though Aiden still struggled to accept they would be settling in for the long term. He adjusted to this concept in the only way he knew how: provoking Nigel at every possible turn.

The Omega was particularly hot-headed and quick to both instigating and ending confrontation, and Will could see the Wolf in Aiden preened at the ability to draw such visceral reactions from the human, relished in the challenge of going head to head with the Omega, even if it was only verbally.

"Overcooked tragedy, that is. Practically charcoal." Aiden poked at his venison steak and frowned. Will saw him pull his sketchbook closer and couldn't help the joy it brought him to see his cousin finally accepting their situation and the hospitality that had been afforded them. It had taken some considerable coaxing to convince Aiden to accept the handmade sketchbook, but Will hadn't seen Aiden quite so happy in a long time. He still remembered Hannibal coming to him, so unsure about whether his gift would be well received. He knew enough of the Fair Folk to know they didn't accept gifts lightly; gifts implied obligation. So Hannibal had made sure to frame the gift to Aiden as payment for services rendered in the aid of the kingdom.

The Wolf had taken to drawing again in his free time; Will had caught him on more than one occasion hiding away in corners or under trees in order to draw the landscape around them. Aiden would never admit it, but even he found beauty in their surroundings.

"Overcoo - it's still bloody!" Nigel screeched, causing Will to flinch at the sheer volume. He didn't miss the motion of Nigel's elbow swiping at Aiden's wine cup, the thick red liquid spilling out across his plate to further drown his blood-soaked meat, only barely missing his sketchpad.

But it *did* miss the sketchpad, further proving in Will's mind how deeply Nigel cared for his cousin, and, despite his near-constant grumbling, Will was sure Aiden cared for the other man just as much.

Beside him, Hannibal gave a soft sigh and turned an apologetic smile to Will. "I'm terribly embarrassed by my brother's behavior," he admitted sheepishly. "I don't know what's gotten into him, to react so grandly to the smallest perceived slight."

Will couldn't stop his lips from twitching into a grin as he cast a glance further down the table to where Aiden and Nigel were bickering, words growing louder and more heated by the minute. "It's more a matter of what *needs* to get into him, I suspect." He could feel his cheeks flame with the heat of embarrassment as Hannibal choked on his sip of wine and turned to Will, eyes wide in scandalized astonishment but glittering with amusement all the

same. He cleared his throat and reached for his own goblet, wings fluttering under Hannibal's studious gaze. "Don't worry yourself over it. I'm certain all will be worked out in due time."

"Well, I can certainly see why the majority of your Folk have taken to sleeping outside the city walls. Less due to the draw to nature and more for some peace and quiet, I should imagine." His lips twitched downward at a particularly gruff snap from Nigel, followed by the slam of his goblet onto the oak table. "I must say, there *does* exist a temptation to join them."

"If it's peace you're looking for, there's no place better than the Forest," Will pointed out, leaning towards Hannibal and bringing his mouth closer to the Alpha's ear to murmur privately, "That *was* an invitation."

"I want to thank you again for your hospitality," Will murmured, breaking the heavy silence that had settled over them as they took their nightly walk through Hannibal's garden.

Hannibal had to admit, if only to himself, it had begun to feel like *their* garden over the last fortnight.

"It means so much to me that my kin feel comfortable enough to remain here, that I needn't doubt their safety for a moment while I'm away."

The reminder of Will's imminent departure the next morning soured something in Hannibal's gut, and he had the absurdly overwhelming and inappropriate instinctual desire to deny Will his leave, to keep him in Rytas regardless of his own wants or needs; safe, close -

Captive.

Hannibal, of course, could do no such thing. Will wasn't a prisoner, nor an object to be clutched possessively against his chest. He had no intention of clipping his wings, holding him against his will until his brilliantly blue eyes turned dark and resentful. Even if the thought of Will's absence left a hollow *ache* within him he would never deprive him his freedom.

"You're certain I can't convince you to remain here alongside them?" He was proud, at least, the uncharacteristic, frantic desperation bubbling up within him didn't seep into his words. "I'm more than happy to extend an invitation for your mother to join us here, if you'd like to send a missive to the Forest for him."

Will turned soft eyes to Hannibal, a sorrowful, half-hearted smile twisting his lips. His wings drooped slightly, and Hannibal found himself mesmerized once more at how expressive the strange appendages could be, how they could so clearly display Will's joy, irritation, anxiety and sorrow.

The way they fluttered, almost as though a shiver were passing through them, when Hannibal complimented him or allowed himself an appreciative gaze that lingered just a little too long. It pained him to see the fascinating and gorgeous wings heavy with burden now.

“I’m afraid that’s just not possible. My mother is less trusting of humans even than most Fae. There is very little chance he would surrender the safety of the Forest again, after having only just returned. His recent journey already held more risk than he cared to court.”

Their steps slowed as they reached the front of the garden again, pausing at the tree Will had made his own for the last two weeks. There laid at its base a smattering of furs and blankets, procured by Hannibal and placed during the mornings while Will was out in the fields saving Hannibal’s people..

Neither of them mentioned the way the bedding mysteriously appeared, but Will had shuffled them around, pushed them into the shape of a proper nest, and Hannibal was happy to have obtained Will’s wordless acceptance of his gifts, his Alpha preening at the chance to provide for its mate.

This was normally when Hannibal would leave the Dragon to curl up on his own, retiring to his own bed. With the weight of Will’s absence already sitting heavy and sick within him, Hannibal dropped gracefully to the ground, folding his legs beneath him and resting his back against the thick, solid trunk of the tree. Will looked slightly surprised to see this, a warm pleasure twisting his features a breath later, and then he followed suit, huddling close enough to Hannibal that they might both make use of the backrest.

Hannibal found himself curious to learn more about Will’s only remaining family outside of Aiden, and instead of curbing that curiosity he embraced it, shifting closer. “Tell me about him. If you’d like, of course. You needn’t feel pressured.”

Will’s smile was brighter than the sun which had set already, and left Hannibal feeling just as warmed. “My mother is a wonderful caretaker and Omega. He cares deeply for his people and the world; has worked harder perhaps than anyone I know to mend relations not only between Fae groups but also with the humans.”

Will paused, his wings dropping heavily down his shoulders. “Sadly his attempts with some of the human settlements bordering our Forest to the North are not as kind or caring as you and your people have been. They killed us in droves once they discovered the true natures of those in their settlement, it’s how Aiden’s parents were taken from us.

Hannibal nearly growled, an image surfacing of his own family and their deaths at the hands of the same brutish people. The Vergers had ruled the North for generations, bloodthirsty and ruthless in their expansion and control.

It had been Hannibal’s own mother who had convinced his father to agree to the peace treaty, and the Vergers who had broken it before it could even be born. Will reached out to place a hand on Hannibal’s, and Hannibal felt immediately soothed. If Will’s wings were any indication the Dragon was also calmed by the touch.

“The Vergers are a blight upon the continent. They sow discord and chaos wherever they are, and they are cunningly ruthless. I am saddened to hear that we share them as a common enemy and sorry for the great losses to your people.”

Will squeezed Hannibal's hand and then shifted so they were close enough to share body heat. "I would rather that neither of us had ever heard the name Verger. Thank you for sharing in your pain with me, I am saddened to hear it so closely mirror my own. We had lived amongst their people for many years, Aiden but a pup when things turned. It was Molson who ordered the slaughter of the wolves and the destruction of their village."

Hannibal bared his teeth at the name. "Molson Verger is a man now many years dead who I truly believe deserves the end he got. Devoured by his own hogs in what many have speculated was a targeted asssasination rather than an accident. Margot is his daughter and she claims her brother's thirst for power is great enough that he could have been the one to remove Molson from the throne."

Will shivered, and Hannibal knew it wasn't from a chill. Talking of such evil men was enough to cause his own stomach to roil, his very being rejecting the concept of killing one's own kin.

"My mother is a kind, loving creature. A shifter, he is Aiden's aunt and missed the carnage of the village by mere hours. Aiden managed to find his way to us following my mother's scent, lost and alone in the Forest for days before he found us. The Fae have long lives and even longer memories. We will not forget what the Verger family did to our people."

"Nor will we. We won't forgive the betrayal. Perhaps if our people - " Will interrupted him before he could continue.

"My people are a generally peaceful sort. They are slow moving, like the Forest. Most of them would rather wait out the death of men than try to fight them." Will paused, contemplative as he looked up to the inky black of the night sky, interrupted by the bright burn of stars splashed across it. "Perhaps, though, this could be a fight that brings us together. A common enemy vile enough to see eradicated."

The sharp glint of teeth was just visible in the light of the low-hanging moon, and Hannibal thought Will had never looked so vicious or so beautiful.

"Let's not speak of such bleak matters. What of your mother? You've spoken so highly of her, she must have been wonderful."

"She was. I loved her more than anything, except maybe our sweet Mischa. She was a natural nurturer. Raised both Nigel and myself to see the beauty in the world around us, though I believe my dear brother has lost his way a bit in that regard."

"I wouldn't call him completely lost just yet." Will countered, a smirk on his plush lips that Hannibal couldn't quite explain.

"She loved all creatures, much like your mother. She wasn't from here, and it took some time for the people to welcome her. To accept her as their Queen. Still she was always in good spirits. She taught me the value of a life. It is, perhaps to my detriment and your own, why I have never moved against the Vergers. The loss of life on all sides would be catastrophic and heedless."

“I think she would be proud of the man you’ve become, of the leader you are to your people. Extending a hand of peace in a time of great need even given your family history with the notion was admirable, Hannibal. It’s one of the reasons I have so happily stayed to help. A reason I’m saddened to leave you, even temporarily.”

“I hope to meet your mother one day soon and show him that men and Fae *can* coexist peacefully and can thrive together even more than we can apart. I cannot thank you enough, dear Will, for all you’ve done for my people. And I can only hope to give back your kindness in full one day.”

It grew quiet after, their breathing slowing and their bodies drifting down the bark of the tree until they were leaning heavily on one another.

The breeze picked up around them, the night air chilled as Summer drew to a close, and when an involuntary shiver spilled through Hannibal, Will flexed and spread one of his wings before encasing Hannibal’s body within its protection without hesitation. Hannibal leaned more firmly into the warmth of the Dragon, resting his head against Will’s own as his eyes drooped and limbs grew heavy in relaxed contentment.

He didn’t recall either of them falling into sleep, though he was certain it was done effortlessly. Nor did he remember, come morning, when the two of them had shifted in the night, sluggish and hazy with sleep, until they were lying properly within the nest, huddled together as though they had done so a hundred times before.

Hannibal rode his mare nearly up to the edge of the Forest, the same spot where he’d first met Will. She balked as they neared the edge, but when he slipped from his saddle and led her closer slowly by foot, she followed cautiously, finally allowing him to latch her to a tree at the Forest’s edge.

He’d slipped away just after dinner just to get to this place undetected, and already he was weary at the thought of having to leave in only a few hours time in order to make it back before morning broke and his absence was discovered. Part of him bristled at the thought - that he, the *King,* should answer to anyone at all with regards to how he spent his free time - but a larger part of him, the part that saw reason and problems from all angles, understood why. The Fae were still largely mistrusted by the citizens of his kingdom, despite the great strides in interrelations recently achieved, and for his people to know Hannibal was not only cavorting with the Green Folk, but stealing away in the dead of night like some sort of criminal to *visit* one…

Suffice to say, he was certain no one would understand. How could they, when they looked upon a creature as magnificent as Will and saw only an oddity, felt nothing more than a passing curiosity about him. When Hannibal stood before Will, every inch of his body vibrated with the restless desire to move *closer,* to *touch.* No one else could understand the pull of the Dragon, because no one else’s mind was wrapped around the thought of him day and night.

The fine hairs on his arms, the back of his neck, prickled and stood at end, Hannibal's stomach swooping when he realized instinctively it was because Will had drawn near to him. He found his eyes tracking along the edge of the Forest, and his breath stalled in his chest when he caught a flash of golden eyes, there and gone, before Will stepped out of the treeline in the same spot.

"I wasn't entirely certain you'd actually come," Will informed him, voice soft and only slightly laced with amusement. There was something else there, something deeper, and Hannibal thought it sounded like relief.

"I was invited," he pointed out, strolling closer to the oak tree Will was leaning against. "And I accepted. To not come would have been rude."

One of Will's brows twitched at that, a slight smirk curling his lips as he assessed Hannibal, his sea glass eyes glinting in the moonlight. "And is propriety the *only* motivation for your visit?"

Hannibal settled in front of Will, close enough that he could feel the heat radiating from the Dragon in the cool night air. When he spoke, his voice rumbled from his chest, huskier than intended. "I think you know that's not the case."

Will's smirk twitched, spread into a soft, genuine smile as he peered up at Hannibal. "I know," he agreed. "Care for the grand tour?"

"Nothing would please me more."

Will gave a twitch of his head, beckoning Hannibal further into the woods and upsetting the fireflies that had been settled into the crown perched upon his dark locks. Hannibal watched as they circled Will's head, luminescent bodies flickering. They buzzed around Will's head for a few minutes, even as the two of them kept a steady pace through the thickening underbrush of the Forest, before finally deciding their home was safe to light upon once more.

Traversing the Forest was surreal, so similar to Hannibal's hunting woods and yet so eerily different. After only a few minutes, the trees were so thick that the large oaks were hemmed in all around them, their great canopies cluttering together and obscuring nearly all of the sky. Hannibal was forced to tread carefully, his feet feeling blindly for solid earth, avoiding tree roots and divots with each step. His only visual guide was Will, his pale, nude body nearly glowing when enough moonlight broke through the trees to shine upon him.

The fact that no human had trekked through this territory in nearly a century sat heavily at the back of Hannibal's mind, words like *forbidden* and *trespasser* swirling at the forefront and settling heavily in his gut. The fact that he was with the proclaimed King of the Forest did little to staunch these nerves - even Will's presence might not protect him if another of the Fae felt that a human interloper was intruding upon their territory.

It was because of this grave knowledge that Hannibal found himself keenly attuned to the darkness around him, and didn't ignore the shiver that spilled down his spine as his prey sense alerted him to the existence of a foreign presence around them.

“Will,” he murmured softly, shoulders drawing up and neck aching with the desire to twist about to locate the source of their company. He increased the speed of his steps, until he was hovering just behind the Dragon, Will’s wings the only thing stopping him from moving closer still. “Will, we’re being watched.”

Will’s soft laugh was irritating and comforting in equal measure. “Those are just the Wisps. Don’t mind them; they’re curious little things. They would only pose a threat if you didn’t have me to guide you truly.”

“And are you?” Hannibal asked, his trepidation comforted by Will’s easy attitude and a teasing tone sneaking back into his words. “Guiding me truly,” he clarified.

Will twisted his head to glance at Hannibal over his shoulder, the Dragon’s white fangs glinting even in the near darkness of the Forest. “If I wished harm upon you, I could have wrought it at any moment. When I met you at the Forest’s edge, when you took me to the stone circle. I could have crept from my nest in your garden straight into your bedroom and killed you as you slumbered.”

The suggestion only brought to mind more possibilities as to what Will could have snuck into his bedroom to do, and the thoughts had Hannibal breathless, desire coiling warm in his gut and eyes prickling as they flashed Alphan red.

He found himself scenting the air as he hemmed closer still to Will, pleased when he caught the heady tang of Will’s own arousal. He longed to reach out and touch, and he nearly succumbed to the temptation when Will ceased all movement, his sudden stillness throwing Hannibal back into the present moment.

Hannibal paused as well and, eyes having finally adjusted properly to the darkness of the dense woods, took in the greenery around him, breathing deep the crisp, fresh air. “The Forest is breathtaking,” he murmured softly, a hum of pleasure thrumming through him as he caught the smile that broke over Will’s face, upturned to the small patches of sky still visible. “I can understand how the drab, stone walls of a castle couldn’t compare to the freedom and beauty of nature.”

“The castle was beautiful too,” Will replied softly. “In its own way. I’ve never seen a structure so grand.” He paused, his features going soft as he turned his gaze to Hannibal. “I like the garden.” His smile fell slightly, hesitance flashing over his face as his wings curled around him. He appeared almost nervous, and then he turned from Hannibal and reached out to pull back the curtain of tree moss that had been blocking their path forward.

Hannibal followed Will as he ducked beneath the low branch. They appeared to have entered a sort of clearing within the Forest, though a glance up showed the canopy above them was so thick and sheltered that no sky was visible. The forest floor was piled with moss and pelts, and the only word Hannibal could think of to describe the intimate space was *haven.*

He turned from his observations back toward Will, who watched him with an almost wary curiosity. “This…”

“This is my nest.”

Hannibal regarded the Dragon before him, soft pride in his voice mingling with an underlying fear of rejection. “It’s lovely.” His smile grew as Will’s cheeks darkened with a flush, his wings fluttering happily at the compliment and drawing Hannibal’s gaze. He could feel Will’s eyes upon him and pulled his gaze back to his face sheepishly. “I apologize for the scrutiny. I imagine there aren’t many humans who’ve had the privilege of such a sight in many years. They are extraordinary. May I?”

He found himself taking an automatic step forward, hand extending before he could even think better of it. Will didn’t seem offended; one wing twitched as his shoulder shrugged and then he swept it out and toward Hannibal. He didn’t hesitate before reaching forward to close the distance, his skin almost *itching* with the incessant urge for closeness. Will’s wings weren’t scaled the way the rest of his body had been when he’d shifted fully, but they were textured slightly and, he was surprised to find, as smooth and supple as well-oiled leather.

“They’re soft,” he murmured softly with fascination. He stroked his hand along the webbing and felt his fingers and palm prickle with warmth at the contact.

Will huffed out a soft laugh. “They’d hardly keep me in the air were they rigid,” he pointed out wryly. His amusement fled, then, but when Hannibal attempted to draw back his hand, Will’s own darted forward to capture it. “Hannibal -” He shifted closer, his eyes dropping down to observe the hand clasped in his own as though he were surprised at its presence there. “Fae have this...occurrence. That happens when two individuals well suited for each other come together. Their bodies, their *magic,* knows when it’s found its perfect match. Do you - do humans have that?”

Hannibal swallowed around the sudden thickness in his throat, his heart leaping against the cage of his chest. “Yes, Will,” he agreed on a shaky breath. He reached forward and collected Will’s other hand gently, shifting again until the two of them were nearly chest to chest. “Yes. True mates. We have that.”

“Dragons -” Will began, his eyes swimming with unshed tears that made Hannibal wonder at just how long Will had felt this lonely. Just how long he himself had felt such crushing loneliness. “Dragons are solitary creatures by nature. My father *needed* a mate when he found my mother. But they didn’t *love* one another. I never thought I would have anything different.”

“You’re a hybrid. Perhaps your needs are more closely aligned to those of your Fae side.”

“Dragons breed strong, but you may be right. My mother is a shifter and a Fae; he’s a hybrid like me, though his shifter lineage is stronger.” Will moved further into his nest, pulling Hannibal along with him.

“I thought Dragons were more mountain-dwelling? How long have you been here in the Forest?”

Will’s smile grew serious for a moment, his eyes growing darker with some unspoken memory. “My people left their home in Yslandria many centuries ago. Not all Fae are wicked, Hannibal, but not all are good either. My grandfather told me stories of how our people came to be here. They wanted peace, wanted to work in synchronicity with the Earth

and all her gifts. But the Unseelie and Seelie Courts refused, both wanting for themselves that which they did not deserve. So the Green Folk left, made our home in the human realm and left Yslandria and all its beauty behind."

Hannibal studied Will's wistful expression, shifted forward until they stood chest to chest once again. He released one of Will's hands and reached up to correct the crown of brambles that had shifted askew. His fingers brushed through the soft locks it was tangled in as he did so, and he couldn't stop the natural progression as he lowered his hand to Will's jaw, brushing a thumb over a cheek that Hannibal could see, even in the darkness, was tinted the color of rare meat.

"Could you ever return?" Strange, how the prospect left something cold and sharp in Hannibal's gut.

Will gave him a soft smile, tilted his face into Hannibal's touch. "Even if we could, I wouldn't wish it. I have no interest in the politics of the Courts, and...humans can't go there." The last was uttered on a breath, almost mournfully, with a meaningful glance to Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal's breath caught in his chest, his eyes dropping to Will's lips, full, inviting and parted on his own stilted breaths. "Will...Will, would it be too forward -"

"No." The word rushed from Will's lips on a sigh, just as quickly as he pushed forward, closing the distance between them and capturing Hannibal's mouth in a fervent kiss.

A growl rumbled through Hannibal's chest at the sensation of Will pressed against him and he deepened their kiss, the Alpha in him demanding he take control, show his mate how capable and virile he was. He licked into Will's mouth, groaning in tandem with the Dragon as their tongues slid together. He didn't even realize his arms had wrapped tightly around Will until his hands were sliding along Will's back, brushing against the areas where his wings sprouted from his shoulder blades; wings that were flexing, fluttering, wrapping around Hannibal the same as Will's arms.

Hannibal buried his hands in Will's curls, jostling his crown out of place once more as he tilted the other man's head to allow Hannibal access to his neck; the fireflies that took up residence there vacated immediately, buzzing irritably around their heads. Neither paid them any notice, too lost in the absolute bliss of physical proximity.

Will shifted against him, and Hannibal could feel him hardening as he writhed against his clothed thigh. Hannibal wasn't unaffected himself, his trousers growing tight as white hot arousal surged through him with such intensity he was nearly left breathless for it.

"Will," he murmured the lovely name between pressing kisses to the tender flesh of his mate's throat; found that, once he began, he couldn't stop saying it. "Will, Will."

"Yes," Will moaned, hands working at Hannibal's clothing. There was much fumbling, the Fae not accustomed to such garments, and he was taking such care to respectfully keep them intact, even as Hannibal could feel the evidence of his claws growing a bit sharper in his heady, desirous state. "Hannibal, *fuck,* this...this is -"

Will gave a full-bodied shudder, his words swallowed by the shocked moan pulled from his throat as Hannibal reached between them to wrap a hand around his erection. Will was hard as stone, hot and heavy in Hannibal's hand, and leaking freely with his arousal. Hannibal couldn't quell the desire to pump him slowly, pushed by the incessant need to bring this wondrous creature pleasure, to push him right to the edge of rapture and then force him to succumb to it.

"Right," Hannibal finished, moving his lips to Will's own once more. "This is right, Will. We were meant for this. Meant for each other."

"Yes," Will hissed again, pressing forward as he finally bared Hannibal's chest, dropping his head to press kisses down his neck, across his shoulder, along his sternum. "I feel like, like," Will let out a fierce growl as words failed him, locking his mouth around one of Hannibal's nipples in lieu of speaking.

"Like I couldn't breathe until I saw you. Like the world was dead to my senses until we touched."

Will gasped as he broke away from Hannibal's chest, tipping his head up to bring their lips close together again. His cheeks were flushed, hair a riotous mess where Hannibal's hands had passed through, and his eyes flashed in his passionate state; not the sharp red of an Alpha, nor the striking gold of an Omega, but a curious mix of both, muddled and alternate all at once. "Like I can no longer imagine my life without you in it."

"You're beautiful," Hannibal admired the curve of his jaw, the arch of his wings where they framed his shoulders and draped down his back. He was glorious.

"I want to have you inside of me. I've known since the first time you touched me," Will paused, hesitation written plainly across his features. He took a breath, seemingly readying himself. "But I *need* to be inside you, Hannibal. I need to feel you."

Hannibal moaned, loud and long, his entire body nearly collapsing with the trembling of his knees, the shudder that wracked through him as he looked upon Will and saw the honest, pure *desire* so evident in his eyes

As Hannibal nodded in agreement, he pulled Will more fully into his nest, both of them immediately falling into the comfort of its confines, sprawled loosely. Hannibal had never had another man inside of him before, but he *wanted it.* He wanted Will in every possible way, wanted to learn his body and have his mate know his own as well.

Will's hands were seemingly everywhere, nimble fingers running through Hannibal's chest hair, petting across his throat and tracing the outline of his lips.

"I want to taste you," Will whispered against Hannibal's mouth, and Hannibal *moaned.* "May I?"

Hannibal couldn't speak, shaking his head earnestly as he shifted to make more room for Will between his thighs.

Will didn't hesitate to shift down, frantically tugging off Hannibal's trousers and dipping his head to swipe a line up the length of Hannibal's hard cock with an impossibly hot tongue. Hannibal shuddered at the sensation, his hands falling immediately to Will's soft curls, petting through them as the Fae continued to lavish attention upon his arousal. He could feel a few of the thorns of Will's crown catch against his skin, felt his flesh tear with a sharp sting and smelled the copper that erupted into the cool night air.

The discomfort was mild, and forgotten just as soon as Will wrapped his lips around Hannibal's length and engulfed him completely. His hands fell to the pelts around him, twisting his fingers in the soft furs and gripping them tightly. He groaned as Will swallowed him down, and Will echoed the sound, his throat vibrating around Hannibal's cock and nearly sending Hannibal right over the edge.

Will must have sensed how close Hannibal was and wanted to prolong his pleasure because, moments later, he pulled off him. He pressed gentle, teasing kisses into the tender flesh of Hannibal's thighs, mouthing over his heavy balls as he slipped his hands beneath Hannibal's ass to tilt his hips up, moving his mouth lower still until -

"Oh -" Hannibal gasped his surprise as Will's lips and then tongue found his hole. "Will, that's -" he moaned at the wet press of pressure against his rim, arching his body into the touch. He'd never imagined having a lover's attention in that place, and could barely fathom the sensations he was experiencing.

Will lapped at him as though he were a source of nourishment, slick tongue writhing against him and then pressing in as soon as Hannibal allowed the muscle to relax. Eventually, a finger joined his tongue, gliding easily into Hannibal and reaching more deeply into him than Hannibal would have thought possible.

The foreign appendages slowly working him open should have felt out of place, felt like an invasion, but Hannibal only wanted *more.* He wanted to experience taking Will into him fully, his mate using him until he spilled inside. Hannibal desired to be the sole reason the Dragon found his pleasure.

Hannibal found himself lost in sensation, craving more than he ever imagined he'd desire. This was so far from his usual trysts with Omegas or Betas, nothing like the clumsy fumblings of his handful of experiments with other Alphas where they simply rutted against each other until the found release. This felt precise, like Will's fingers were *made* to be inside of Hannibal's body, like he'd already carved out a place for himself deep within.

"That's perfect, my love, you look gorgeous like this," Will praised him, and it hooked in his stomach and *yanked,* his pleasure pooling warm and heavy at the base of his spine. He rocked himself against Will's tongue and finger, cried out when Will pulled out only to slide back in with two digits, laving his tongue decadently along the flesh where it stretched out around his fingers.

"Will -" Hannibal gasped, arching up into Will's touch, wanting to feel his body against his own, flesh to flesh. Will kept his pace steady and even, what felt like hours passing by as Hannibal's skin flushed and began to shine with sweat.

Will reached for something buried beneath all the folds of his nest, a stoppered vial of liquid shining in the low light of the moon and stars. He used his teeth to pull the cork from the glass and Hannibal watched as he slathered some of the contents across his fingers and against Hannibal's hole, the substance warmed slightly by their body heat and tacky to the touch.

"You planned for this," Hannibal groaned as Will's fingers slid into him once more, the way eased substantially by the oil coating his fingers. The statement was only partially accusatory.

"Yes," Will admitted shamelessly on a huff of breath, working his digits into Hannibal with increasing fervency. "You did as well, or you would not have come."

The rejoinder on Hannibal's tongue faltered and died as Will's fingers bent and stroked at a private place deep within him. The movement sent shocks of pleasure through his body, left him breathless and trembling and on the verge of begging for more.

He didn't even realize his legs had wrapped around Will until the Dragon was shifting between them, edging his body closer to Hannibal's, lining himself up...

The press of Will against him was enough to pull another shuddering moan from Hannibal, his hips jerking up instinctively in an attempt to draw the Fae nearer. "Yes; please, Will, *yes -"*

Will hissed as his cockhead butted against and then was slowly accepted by Hannibal's hole. He pushed inside, his pace slow but relentless, until they were joined flush together; until he was buried as deep within Hannibal as he could reach.

Hannibal clenched around him, his body so warm and tight as Will slowly pulled back out of him before sinking in again just as slowly.

Hannibal let his legs fall further apart, accommodating his lover so they were as close as possible, Will filling him up impossibly well. He'd never felt so connected to another soul, nearly delirious with his pleasure.

"You feel amazing. So perfect," Will breathed into Hannibal's mouth before claiming his lips in a needy, nearly violent kiss full of teeth stained crimson.

"Want your knot, Will. Please. I want to feel you all the way back to the castle," Hannibal pleaded, grinding himself down harder on Will's thick cock. He could feel his knot at the base, pressing against his entrance but never pressing in.

"Not this time, my love. But one day when we are able to take our time, when I can get you nice and relaxed and ready for me. Then I'll mount you; give you everything you need."

The friction of Will's belly against Hannibal's cock and the sensation of being so full of his lover pushed Hannibal over the edge in a matter of minutes. He didn't even consider being ashamed of the quickness with which he spilled between their bodies, his mind floating somewhere amongst the stars shining brightly through the copse of trees surrounding them.

Will stilled above him, groaning as Hannibal clenched around him, and Hannibal could feel Will's hand slip between them, his fingers wrapping around his knot to keep it from catching or trying to sink into Hannibal's underprepared entrance. Will's cock pulsed within him, his seed pooling warm and thick inside him and Hannibal nearly came again at the very thought of being branded by his beloved, marked in a way that no one ever had or ever would.

It was the most intimate experience of his life, moreso when Will gathered his arms around Hannibal and turned them on their sides - still buried inside him, though he'd successfully kept his knot from fully expanding. Hannibal almost wished he *had* knotted him, wished his body could accommodate his Alpha, could breed for him.

The Dragon gave a sleepy hum of contentment and pulled Hannibal close, enclosing his wings tightly around them. Hannibal echoed the sound, his body lax from pleasure and warmed by the heat of his lover. It only felt natural to allow his heavy eyes to drift shut, burrowing closer still to Will until every inch of flesh imaginable was pressed tightly together.

When sleep came for him, Hannibal did not fight it.

It felt so natural to have Hannibal wrapped in his arms, encased by his wings, that Will very nearly allowed the both of them to succumb to the temptation of sleep. His nest had never felt as comfortable as it did when his mate was lying within it alongside him, and Will had to remind himself that despite whatever fervent declarations the two of them had exchanged in the heat of the moment, the fact still stood that Hannibal was human, and not yet tied to him, and would therefore forfeit his safety if he was discovered by another Fae within the confines of the Forest.

His chest swelled as he gazed upon the man, his usually stoic visage having melted away to lax contentment as he dozed, pressed against Will's chest, snuggled into the pelts that made up a large portion of his nest. Will let temptation take hold of him, allowed it to raise his hand and brush his fingers softly across Hannibal's sharp cheek, down his strong jaw. He didn't find it anything other than natural to follow up the soft touch by tilting Hannibal's face up to his own and pressing their lips together tenderly.

Hannibal returned the kiss, pressed forward for another lazy joining as soon as they parted. This, too, Will could do all night; it was with great reluctance that he admitted they didn't have the time. "We need to get you out of the Forest," Will murmured against his mouth between kisses. "You'll need to leave soon if you're to make it back before dawn."

"Let the sun come," Hannibal rumbled, the hand splayed across Will's chest drifting south with a meandering caress. "I don't answer to Nigel."

Will shuddered under his touch, was tempted, again, to wile away the hours - this time with an activity far more strenuous than sleeping. And while he was proud Hannibal was willing to face the wrath of his kin just to spend a bit more time with him, Will knew the matter was far from that simple. He gave a sigh, catching Hannibal's hand before it traveled too low, past the point where Will couldn't stop it if he *wanted* to.

“It’s not Nigel that concerns me. It’s a matter of your safety. Tentative peace and interactions aside, humans as a whole are still not welcome within the Forest.” He pulled the hand he had caught trailing teasingly down his stomach up to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to Hannibal’s palm. “Consider it a favor to my peace of mind, my heart. Leave before it becomes a problem.”

Hannibal relented with his own soft sigh, and Will could feel the brush of hair against his shoulder as Hannibal nodded. “Very well. Am I correct in assuming I cannot convince you to return to Rytas along with me?”

Will pushed himself to sitting in his nest with another mournful sigh, reached out and tugged at Hannibal’s hands to urge him along as well. “Would that I could, but I’ve been away from the Forest for too long. Unofficial King though I am, the Green Folk still look to me for wisdom and judgement. And with my mother here, I am needed more than ever.”

Hannibal’s mouth was upon him then, stealing the next sigh that threatened to leave his lips and drinking down the soft moan that fled his throat in its stead. “Swear to me then that nothing shall keep us parted. Promise me we shall come together again soon.”

Will’s heart sank at Hannibal’s earnest expression, hearing the yearning plea in his vow. He considered the mortal before him, how short a life, how fragile, and made a conscious decision to ignore the practicalities of their situation. He would put aside his fears that they were simply two different creatures from two worlds so entirely opposite that they’d never find true, lasting happiness.

“The stars above shall sooner blink out of existence,” Will swore, pressing another kiss to Hannibal’s hand. “Now come, my love.”

Hannibal allowed himself to be pulled to standing from the mess they’d made of Will’s nest. Will knew the Alpha’s scent would be soaked into the soft pelts they’d lain upon, knew that he would roll within them and hug them close, desperate to keep the scent as near as he could before it inevitably faded. He tried to make himself forget that Hannibal likely wouldn’t be back any time soon to refresh his mark.

Their walk out of the Forest was far more somber than their trek in had been; quieter, as well. The silence stretched between them thickly, broken only by the rustle of underbrush and the soft chirping of insects. They were very near the boundary of the Forest when another sound broke out: a rustling not caused by Will or Hannibal’s movement, and far greater than any of the small, harmless creatures of the Forest might elicit.

He reached out for Hannibal before even considering it, halting the human’s progress with a hand wrapped around his upper arm and stepping before him protectively, peering ahead into the dark woods before them.

A voice sounded, then muffled laughter, and the disturbance in the brush grew louder as two figures stumbled out of the thick of the trees and onto the walking path Will and Hannibal had been traversing.

Even in the darkness, even with their features obscured, bound together as they were at mouth, chest and hips, Will knew exactly who had stumbled across their path. The challenging possessiveness that burned through his veins dissipated, replaced by amusement and the smug arrogance that went along with being proven *right* about something.

He relinquished his protective stance before Hannibal, folding his arms across his chest and waiting for the two miscreants to realize that they were no longer alone.

They did, after another few moments of obscenely wet sounding kisses and sucks breaking the stillness of the Forest, and as soon as their presence was registered, Aiden bared his teeth on a growl and slipped into his own protective stance in front of Nigel. When he realized who their company was, his shoulders dropped, cheeks blossoming with color as he turned his gaze away from Will, who couldn't stop the inquisitive arch of his eyebrow, nor the smirk that crept over his lips.

"You absolute hypocrite," Will proclaimed teasingly, fangs bared on a grin as his eyes slid from his embarrassed cousin to Hannibal's brother, who didn't appear out of sorts in the least to have been caught in such a compromising position.

"I told you this was where they'd disappeared to," Nigel elbowed Aiden in the ribs with a wide grin, the wolf huffing out a surprised breath as he glowered.

Nigel smirked at Will and Hannibal in turn, smug and happy to show off He had an ease about him that Will sincerely hoped Aiden would eventually learn for himself, the Alpha always so serious in matters of their home.

"If you're here, Nigel, who's at the castle?" Hannibal's tone was light and joyful, and Will smiled wider at the sound of his mirth.

"Margot's in charge. That woman could bleed a stone with her stare, brother. She's terrifying," Nigel's shoulders shook when he laughed, moving Aiden's arm with the motion. Aiden blushed, taking a few more steps away from his compromising position. "She sent us to collect *you,* anyway. Seems your absence has been noted."

Hannibal grimaced, his shoulders tensing slightly. Will knew the responsibility of leading a people, but he couldn't imagine the weight Hannibal felt with all eyes on him and the very fate of his people resting on him.

"What do you think you're doing out here with *him,* Alpha?" Aiden knew Will hated being referred to by that title, his cousin only using it when he was trying to rile him. Will hated watching the easy laxness of Aiden's shoulders be wiped away at their discovery. He wondered how long things had been happening between the Alpha and Omega.

"I took him to my nest, of course," Will replied, easy as anything. He could see Hannibal's surprised look from the corner of his eye, clearly intrigued Will had decided to be so bold, and saw the same surprise mirrored on Aiden's features.

"You *what?* You took him to the throne?" Aiden stepped away from Nigel, putting distance between them while bringing himself closer to Will. Will slipped effortlessly between

Hannibal and Aiden, keeping them separated.

Will rolled his eyes and laughed. “It’s hardly as serious as all that, Aiden. And fair play, besides. I’ve seen Hannibal’s throne, it’s only fair I show him mine.”

“Throne?” Hannibal asked, his voice soft and his face so fond. It made Will’s chest ache and his lungs seize up for a moment, the *love* so evident in the quirk of Hannibal’s lips and the glittering of his eyes. Will loved him so much already as well, was helplessly enamored with his brilliant mind and his kind soul.

Will shrugged, still smiling. “An object can be more than one thing, my heart.”

Aiden’s face was thunderous at that, his dear cousin knowing precisely how special and important such a term of endearment was to a Dragon. Dragon’s souls were in their hearts, their very essence stemming from the blazing golden ember at their core. A Dragon kept the egg that had borne them with them always, tucked away inside their chest, giving them life in more than one way. Referring to a loved one by such a phrase was the ultimate show of devotion and love.

“Will, this is *madness.* You can’t possibly think this will work?”

Will’s smile dropped at the fierce reminder, something he’d already been thinking himself just moments before. Hannibal squeezed his hand reassuringly but even that wasn’t enough to bring back Will’s smile. Aiden was right in this, of course. It simply wasn’t possible. It didn’t matter that they were true mates; the humans would never accept Will. And the Fae were capricious, some of them even to the point of cruelty. They’d never allow Hannibal or his people to dwell within the sanctuary of the Forest.

He was only hurting himself and Hannibal by pretending otherwise. His father had always taught him how important duty was, loyalty to your people. He couldn’t be with Hannibal and still perform his duties to those who relied on him.

“Will? What is he talking about?” Hannibal’s smooth, smoky voice was laced with concern, apprehension, and it pained Will’s heart to hear it.

He turned toward Hannibal, the human that fate had cruelly dictated to be his mate, casting a helpless gaze upon him. “Aiden is the only one bold enough to speak of what we all know is true. Our people will never unite, we’ll be unable to bond as a proper mated pair, your body incapable of withstanding a Fae bond. It is, perhaps, a fool’s errand for us to even entertain the thought.”

Hannibal took a step forward, and Will despised that his instinct was to take a step back. If Hannibal reached out and touched him now, Will knew his resolve would crumble like sand. “We would not feel so compelled toward one another if we weren’t a good match,” Hannibal countered. “Perhaps we should simply trust in what our bodies, our *souls* are telling us.”

“I think we both know it’s not that simple.” Will ignored the urge to reach out to Hannibal, to touch and scent him and wipe away the desolate expression that darkened his sharp, beautiful features. He sighed and felt his body rippling before he’d even made the conscious decision

to shift. He often took his Dragon form when he was at his most distressed, his body naturally seeking out the strength of his Dragon to help him withstand his inner turmoil.

“I need some time to think. Perhaps my mother will know something more of Fae and human bonds, he is well versed in lore and the history of your people.” Will knew his voice was echoing in Hannibal’s head even as he finished speaking based on the look of surprised awe on his mate’s face. It was nearly enough to compel him to take Hannibal with him, to flee their problems together.

Casting one more glance toward Aiden and Nigel, Will murmured, “I hope you have found an easier happiness with Nigel, dear cousin.”

The strong muscles in his thighs propelled him up into the air, his wings catching the wind and carrying him away.

Chapter End Notes

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We also have a Discord server where you can chat with us, throw us prompts, and post images/art inspired by our work! You may also catch a snippet or two of some WIPs!

'Til next time! 💚 💜 BellaRai

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You still take your nightly walks.”

Will paused in the entrance of his nest, eyes falling on his mother, who appeared to have made himself quite comfy within it. After a moment, he nodded and stepped further in, allowing the curtain of moss to fall into place behind him. “I had thought you’d be nesting with the other wolves, after having been away for so long.”

Roan’s dark eyebrows drew down over stormy eyes, his full lips pulling into a small frown as he waved a hand in a careless gesture. “Each wolf is a part of a whole, and the pack has plenty to keep everyone warm. Who does my son have?”

Will’s cheeks warmed at his mother’s knowing look and hoped his flush couldn’t be seen in the minimal light filtering in through the canopy. At the same time, sorrow and longing twisted violently in his stomach, opposing emotions that battled within him for control. He gazed at his mother, and felt almost guilty when he couldn’t force his tongue to form a response to the query.

“When I left on my little quest to bring more packs to the Forest I didn’t expect to return only to find my normally light-hearted, happy son a brooding, heavy-winged thing, let *alone* humans and Fae working together once more. I feel almost as though I’ve stumbled through a veil into another world.”

When Will remained silent, his mother’s lips spread into a tender, calming smile. “Will,” Roan’s maternal purr was so inherently comforting, so terribly missed, that tears sprang to Will’s eyes immediately. His mother reached a hand out to him, encouraging and insistent. “Come to me, child.”

Will had long since left his fledgling years behind him, but even so could not resist the call of the man that had bore him. He drew closer with heavy, trudging steps and then crumpled into his nest, curling up as small as he could make himself and laying his head into his mother’s lap as though he were still just a pup. His mother’s hands were waiting; they pulled the crown of twigs and brambles from his head and set it aside gently before slipping into his curls with soft, soothing sweeps.

“Your spirits have been even lower since we returned from Yslandria. I don’t know what you expected to find there, and I’m truly sorry the Shrine didn’t hold the answers you sought, but perhaps it’s time now to talk to me. You forged relations with the humans, Will. You left the safety of the Forest, you poured your energy and soul into brittle, barren earth to help a group of people you only had reason to see as your enemy. Your very nest still smells of a strange Alpha, darling. Tell me about him.”

Will's heart clenched in his chest at the mention of his mate, *his heart.* Tears brimmed and threatened to fall from his red-rimmed eyes, and he clutched his mother closer still. "He's *everything,"* Will's voice was soft, his throat thick with emotion.

Roan shifted them so he could better see Will's face, wiping tears from his cheeks as they finally spilled over. "Oh my darling boy. You love him?"

To hear it stated so plainly drew Will's breath from his lungs and left him reeling. He'd considered it, of course he had, but they'd never said it so honestly and openly. He knew it was absurd to love someone so much so soon, but it felt as though he'd been waiting for Hannibal his entire life from nearly the first moment they'd met. After their first touch, Will had known he was lost.

He sniffled and nodded pitifully, burying his face further into Roan's neck and finding strength and courage in his mother's closeness. "He's my mate, I know he is. I felt it, mother. The first time we touched, I felt it in my *heart."*

Roan barely masked a gasp of surprise, but Will could feel the vibration in his chest. A Dragon could go nearly their entire life without meeting their mate, Will's own father had never found his True Mate, settling with Roan instead in order to breed and continue his line.

"If that is true, Will, why are you here and not with him, my love? You must *ache* without him near." Will nearly whimpered his acknowledgement, he felt sick with loss, his chest cracked open and hollowed out with Hannibal so far from him. It had been weeks in this realm, but in Yslandria it had felt like months.

"Our people will never accept our mating, and we could never bond. He'll grow old and die and pass through the veil where I cannot follow him and I think it will break me. I'd rather have him not at all if the alternative is having him and losing him."

Roan sighed, and Will heard him start to purr low and soothing in his chest as he ran his fingers through Will's wild locks. "My sweet child, all things must eventually die on this plane. That only makes the enjoyment of them all the sweeter and more worthy. You will love one another fiercely and passionately, and appreciate every precious moment you have together."

Will lifted his head, looking into Roan's stormcloud eyes. There was a glimmer there that wasn't for Will alone, and it made something in him *shift.* His mother was right, of that he was certain, but his words weren't meant just for Will.

"Mother… did you *meet someone?"* At the broad smile that split his mother's face Will scrambled to sit up, rubbing a hand across his face to try and collect himself.

"We aren't talking about me, baby. We are talking about *you* and your *mate."* Roan's smirk was full of mirth and his eyes shone more brightly than Will could ever recall.

"Are they -" Will started, unsure of what he was asking. "Are they your True Mate?"

Will's mother paused, a shadow of something passing over his features before he shook himself free and smiled brightly again at Will, unable to hide his joy. "She is, yes. And if what I feel for her is even part of what you feel for your mate, I know you are missing him, darling. You should return to him."

Will's heart clenched in his chest at the thought of seeing Hannibal, though the font of joy that swelled within him was quickly overwhelmed by the black, icy tendrils of doubt and guilt that sprouted forth. "I abandoned him," Will admitted shamefully, wings and head drooping heavily as tears burned his eyes. "I just left, gave up on him, on *us,* without even trying."

His mother's gentle and sure hand tipped his face up once more. He tutted at Will, wiping away the tears that fell automatically with the movement. "My child. Is there anything your mate could do that you would not overlook?"

Will didn't even need to consider the question. He knew, instinctively and unequivocally what the answer was. "No. I'd forgive him any indiscretion. I would seek his love and grant him mine until the end of time."

Roan's lips twisted into a knowing smile, his eyes shining with mirth. "Then I think he will forgive you one moment of uncertainty. Go, my love."

He contemplated once more the notion of seeing Hannibal, of being close enough to finally scent him, touch him again. He couldn't stop the smile that twisted his lips wide, the breathy laugh that was pulled from his chest. He would go, he knew, and without delay. And as soon as he accepted that decision, he almost felt as though it had been decided for him, long before he and Hannibal were drawn together, before the treaty, before either of them ever existed in this realm.

Will darted forward to press an appreciative kiss to his mother's cheek, scrambled to his feet from his position in the nest, and then sped from his haven toward the closest opening that would grant his Dragon form clearance to depart the Forest. And for the first time in weeks, Will felt light.

Will's people had been in Rytas for nearly an entire season, their leader gone for the last several weeks as the crops became ready for harvest and the kingdom prepared for the coming winter months. Hannibal spent more time away from the castle than within it, leaving Margot to handle most of the day-to-day affairs and Nigel in charge of attending to the relations with the Fae.

A grand dinner party had been planned for that very evening, and Hannibal only wished that Will was still there to experience the celebrations with him.

"You must accept our invitation to the dinner, Aiden. We want to show our appreciation for the efforts of you and your people. The citizens of Rytas thank you," Hannibal paused, smiling slightly at the wolf's obvious discomfort at the display of gratitude. *"I* thank you."

“Will should be here for this, not me. The honor should belong to him for bringing us all together. You know I never would have been here without his coaxing.”

Hannibal hoped his heartbreak wasn’t obvious at the mention of his missing mate. Hannibal had spent weeks inquiring after Will, and the time he hadn’t spent roaming the lands he’d spent either at the stone circle or in his private garden, often sleeping in Will’s abandoned nest. His complexion had grown darker during his travels, his flaxen hair now with more prominent streaks of brown after so many days spent searching in the sun.

Neither the people of Rytas, nor Will’s own people had been particularly *easy* with the concept of their worlds possibly merging, the humans especially skeptical after so long separated from the Fae. There were still those amongst Will’s people that remembered when things had been good with the humans, an equal number who remembered the bad. But no human alive in Rytas had ever met any of the Fair Folk until Will brought them to the kingdom. Their unease was expected, but had manifested in increasingly uncontrollable ways.

Hannibal had grown as accustomed to the way Aiden often conveyed his emotions through subtle facial expressions, their weeks alone together helping to build a familiarity between them. He could read Aiden’s concern in the shifting twitch of his jaw. “You will be safe, Aiden. Your people will be safe, I swear to you.”

Aiden shuffled, huffed out, “I trust you.” Even if Hannibal was to never again hold his mate in his arms, it meant more to him than he could express with words to hear the wolf so confidently declare his trust. It had been a tumultuous journey to achieve such an honor, and Hannibal would treasure it.

Aiden’s face shifted suddenly, a flicker of confusion and then a broad smile that pulled his mouth so wide his teeth gleamed bone-white and sharp in the low light of the hall. Hannibal turned to follow Aiden’s gaze where it was targeted over his shoulder, his breath catching in his chest at the sight of his Will standing in the stone archway leading to Hannibal’s private rooms.

“I’ll leave the two of you. I’m sure you have much to discuss.” Aiden squeezed Hannibal’s shoulder supportively and slid into the shadows, disappearing down the corridor.

Hannibal stared at Will as though he were the answer to existence itself, and it sent his heart racing within the confines of his chest. He wet his lips, swallowed around the lump in his throat, and forced himself to say the words he needed to speak.

“I’m sorry. I abandoned you -”

“You didn’t,” Hannibal denied immediately, brows furrowing as he took a step forward, began to reach out with a reassuring hand before thinking better of it and dropping it to his side.

“I abandoned you,” Will repeated firmly, because he did not deserve Hannibal’s easy forgiveness for his actions. Because he *ached* for Hannibal’s touch and knew he didn’t deserve it. “And I shouldn’t have. If I could change events as they were I would, but it cannot be so.”

“You’re here now,” Hannibal pointed out, took another step forward until they were close enough to feel the heat radiating from one another’s bodies. “And with impeccable timing. The Green Folk’s boon to the crops has shown substantial results. We’ve harvested enough to get us through the next harvest season, with no threat to the city *or* common folk. We’ve decided to show our appreciation to the Fae with an Autumn Harvest feast. As the guest of honor, I sorely hope you will agree to attend.”

Will couldn’t stop the smile that tugged at his lips, couldn’t stop himself from closing the distance between them until Hannibal’s hands reached out to grasp at his hips instinctively. “I’m so happy to hear that, Hannibal. But the harvest was always meant for your people. You needn’t waste even a grain of it in thanks to us. We were more than happy to provide assistance.”

Hannibal’s brows furrowed at that, his lips twitching into a frown. “It’s hardly a waste. We’d have slowly starved if you’d not been kind enough to assist us.” His grip around Will’s waist flexed, an uncharacteristic hesitation coloring his tone when he next spoke. “There is...another reason I wish for your attendance.” His hand found Will’s jaw, cupping it softly as his thumb swept lightly over Will’s cheekbone. Will reached up with a hand of his own, covering Hannibal’s and holding it against him even as his face tilted into the touch.

“I’m so thankful you’ve returned. I wish for your presence because I - well, with your permission, it would please me -” Hannibal halted again, fumbling over words, also quite uncharacteristically, and growing more flustered by the moment.

Will let a soothing purr rumble from his chest, twisting his face until he could press a kiss to Hannibal’s palm. “You can tell me anything, my heart.”

Hannibal stared at him, fondness and adoration shimmering in his amber eyes. He took a breath, and then released his words upon the rush of his exhale. “I intend to name you as my mate.”

Will experienced the disorienting sensation of his chest swelling and his heart dropping all at once, and for a moment he was silent as he attempted to reconcile the disparity. “Even after everything? After I left you in the Forest? Hannibal -”

“I remember what we discussed, Will. I know things will never be entirely as we wish them to be. I know I can never lay my mark upon you, or receive yours in turn, but that has yet to stop us from finding joy and peace in one another, has it?” Hannibal tilted his head down to brush a kiss against Will’s lips, and Will could do nothing else but sigh into it and return the affection.

“Fate was kind and cruel to us in equal turns,” Hannibal pointed out as he brushed kisses along Will’s jaw. “To bring us together but see to it that there will always be a certain sort of

divide between us. It matters not at all to me. Not as long as we're together in some form or another."

"I love you," Will sighed, rubbing his cheek against Hannibal's to scent him. “I’ve missed you terribly. Missed the Forest; even missed this stone behemoth,” he arced a glance to the stone walls around them.

“Where did you go?” Hannibal asked between kisses pressed to Will’s jaw. He nuzzled the slender column of Will’s throat tenderly before planting his nose at the Dragon’s scent glands and greedily inhaling the scent of his mate. “I searched for you. Every day for weeks. Your kin swore you were not within the Forest.”

“I went with my mother to Yslandria,” Will admitted, feeling like a hypocrite after having told Hannibal explicitly he had no intention or desire to return to the homeland of the Fae. “There’s a shrine there; a place to seek wisdom from our ancestors. I needed time and space to think. In a place where your proximity wasn’t enough to scramble my thoughts, replacing every other desire with the overwhelming urge to be close to you.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

Will’s lips twitched into a wry smile. “No. As it turns out, your proximity was never the problem. Your very existence…the entirety of me *ached* being separated from you. I found my thoughts growing in clarity by the moment, but always they circled back to *you.* I recalled wistfully the tilt of your smile, the soft caress of your hands. I lay alone in a nest at night, and when I closed my eyes all I could see were yours, flashing red with desire. Arousal threatened to send me mad, but every time I wrapped a hand around myself I could only remember how perfect it felt being buried inside you.”

Hannibal pulled away from Will’s neck, gazing at him with such intensity that Will felt his cheeks flush with color; his stomach gave a twist, heart working a bit harder in his chest. “I have recalled often how close I felt to you that evening. I’ve felt as though a piece of me was missing since then; there’s a certain hollowness to being without your mate. I’ve found that I do not care for it at all.”

“You needn’t feel it again,” Will swore, this time earnest in his promise. “Each day in this realm is more like a week in Yslandria. I felt your absence like a hollowness in my chest for months. Before I returned to Rytas I spent some time alone with my mother in the Forest. When my ancestors failed to speak to me in Yslandria, I sought guidance from him instead.”

“Did he hold the wisdom you sought?”

Will huffed a laugh, nuzzling once more against Hannibal’s neck and cheek, breathing deeply the soothing scent he had missed so greatly all those weeks alone. “Sort of. He told me to quit overthinking, stop being an idiot, and to just be *happy* already.”

Will’s eyes fluttered shut as Hannibal’s hand shifted from his cheek to pet down his neck, sliding lower over his flanks until it rested at his hip, holding him against Hannibal’s own. “And are you? Happy?”

Will peered up at the Alpha before him, his heart so full he thought his lungs might burst from the strain. “You can call me your mate,” Will allowed with a soft smile. “I’ll be doing the same until the end of time.”

Dinner had gone surprisingly well, nearly everyone in attendance kneeling to accept Will as Hannibal’s true mate, no small thanks to Jack Crawford and his testimony in favor and support of Will and his people. Hannibal was surprised to find Jack loitering in his throne room after dinner, brimming with restless energy. “I thought I might find you here. Sought you out in your garden first but only found a nest that smelled of Dragon. And of *you.”* Jack’s smile was broad and his eyes shone with joy as he looked between a smirking Will and a blushing Hannibal.

“I’ve found sleeping beneath the open sky peaceful as of late,” Hannibal replied smoothly, squeezing Will’s hand where it still rested in his own. He’d barely been able to consider parting from Will’s touch since his return, wanting to keep his mate with him always. “You look well, Jack. How’s Bella? We were sorry not to see her at the festivities.”

“That’s what I’m here about, actually. I want to thank you for bringing the Fair Folk, for bringing Will, back to Rytas. Bella has made a full recovery, stronger than ever. Me and the girls are overjoyed to have her back and we have your Will to thank for it. She’s with Cassandra tonight, the pregnancy is exhausting Cassie so easily now that we are nearing the end. But my family is whole and well thanks to you, Will.” Jack claps Will on the shoulder and Hannibal can feel the vibrations through his palm.

“It was my honor to aid your family, Jack. I can also give you a remedy for your daughter’s pregnancy sickness. Crushed ginger root mixed into herbal tea will help with her nausea and muscle relaxation.”

Jack’s smile grew even broader at the offered assistance, and his eyes glittered with joy. “I’m so happy for you both. Hannibal's mother had some Fae in her, ya know. I’m sure things will work out just fine for you both.”

“You must be mistaken, Jack. My mother was human.” Hannibal interjected, the smile faltering from his lips. Alexandria Lecter had been otherworldly in her kindness and love of Hannibal, but she’d been fully human. He would have known. She would have told him...

“Oh I’m sorry, Hannibal. I assumed you knew. As I live and breathe I swear she was half. I was the one that first found her when she showed up at the stone circle. Naked as the day she was born and causing flowers to bloom everywhere she stepped. We were in hard times then, too. Much like now. Your father married her as an alliance and she blessed the land and aided our crops.” Jack paused, a considering look upon his features.

“He swore me to secrecy to protect her, and later on you and your brother and sister. The people were far less trusting, then. It was a darker time. I thought you were doing the same when you went to seek out the king of the Green Folk. I thought your parents would have told you.” Jack looked terribly guilty, and Hannibal couldn’t blame the man. He’d been loyal to Hannibal’s father, had never shared this secret even with Hannibal.

“Hannibal, if you have Fae blood it means we can mark one another without risking your life or your sanity,” Will sounded as breathless as Hannibal felt, and when Hannibal turned to look at his mate he saw tears rimming his eyes, threatening to spill down his cheeks.

“Jack, send our regards to Bella and the girls. It appears Will and I have much to discuss.”

Their discussion didn’t last long, both of them devolving into gluttonous creatures of pure need at the realization that they could claim one another, could *mate and bond* without concern. Will’s eyes were flooded a bright, crystalline blue, his pupil a thin slit of inky black in the center. His lips, usually plush and pink, were slicked red with blood from the fangs now crowding his mouth and cutting through his gums.

“If I saw you every day, forever, my darling Will, I would remember this time. You are resplendent.” Hannibal approached slowly. Will may only be partially shifted, but his instincts tended to take over more easily in his Dragon form, and Hannibal didn’t want to risk his distress at any sudden movements.

Will’s chest vibrated with the intensity of his pleased purr, his lips spreading wide in a grin that was part animal threat and part true contentment.

The moon was blood red and full, hanging in the sky above the courtyard, and illuminating everything in a soft sepia glow, like the edges of nearly forgotten memories. Hannibal guided Will to the nest his sweet Dragon had built beneath his tree on the edge of Hannibal’s private gardens, smiling as he saw the scraps of cloth from his own clothing combined with moss and branches and a thick animal hide.

So much had nearly torn them apart, and it meant everything for them to come together again in this sacred space.

Hannibal stretched a tentative hand out to his lover, pleased when Will’s wings relaxed from their tensed hold and the Dragon stepped closer, into his embrace. He dipped his head and nuzzled against Hannibal’s neck and jaw, scenting him and allowing himself to be scented in turn. Hannibal breathed deeply as their combined scents stirred within the night air; he was fairly certain he could live the rest of his life only smelling the bouquet of their combined essence.

“I love you, my darling. My beautiful, extraordinary, beloved Will,” Hannibal declared softly, punctuating his praise with a soft kiss to Will’s forehead, temple, cheek. Their lips brushed together, parted with breaths going ragged, and all Hannibal wished to do was lick into his mate’s mouth, taste him and drink down his pleasured sighs as they joined together.

He pulled back to gaze upon Will, pale skin glowing resplendently in the moonlight, and found that he had to swallow around a lump in his throat when he next tried to speak.

He dropped to his knees, the easiest gesture of faith and obedience he’d ever experienced in his life, clutched at Will’s hands and spoke the vow common of his people for Alphas to join with their mate.

“From this moment, you shall never be alone. My strength shall be your guide, my heart shall be your home. My claws shall protect, my fangs shall provide; from now until death, I will walk by your side.”

A soft, wounded sound lodged in Will’s chest at the declaration, and only a moment later he fell to the earth as well, pressing closely to Hannibal, his wings stretching and then surrounding them fully. It felt warm and safe, reminiscent of that first night he and Will had lain together in this very nest, nothing but the moon and the stars to stand vigil.

Hannibal met Will’s eyes, as blue and as wet as the sea, glinting in the moonlight. His lips trembled as he took a breath, his voice shaky and thick with tears when he spoke. “Today, and for all days, I join you. May you find my devotion as stable as the earth and my love as unending as the sky. Together we shall grow as beautiful and endless as the ocean, stronger than the deep roots of the oak. Together we are one, now and forever.”

Will pressed forward, slotted their lips together, and Hannibal licked into his mouth eagerly, arousal surging through him as Will’s blood stained his mouth. His fangs *ached* to sink into his mate’s neck, to stake a claim bloody and deep, so that no one may ever look upon the Dragon and not see that he belonged to Hannibal, that they belonged to each other. The rumbling snarl might have vibrated from either of their chests, the soft whine of desperate *need* from either of their lips.

Will cheeks were damp when they broke from their kiss, foreheads pressed together and panting. Hannibal’s hands had somehow ended up tangled in Will’s unruly curls, and he used his grip there to turn Will’s face, kissing away the tears that had fallen. “Will, I need -” His words came out thick and low on a growl, nearly indecipherable. “I need to mark you.”

Will’s own hands had come to rest upon Hannibal’s chest, petting through the rug of hair that covered it. He gave a solid push until Hannibal fell back into the nest, scrambling atop him so he was perched framing Hannibal’s hips. He dipped down to press their mouths together for another fervent kiss, barely breaking the brush of their lips as he murmured, “Inside first.”

He was already lifting his hips and lining himself up before Hannibal’s foggy brain could even catch up. His hands fell to grasp Will’s waist, a warning to wait, to slow down, to allow Hannibal to prepare him first dying on his lips as Will sank onto him. He was *wet,* and *open,* just like an Omega. Hannibal groaned as Will’s tight heat encompassed him, the Dragon settling on Hannibal’s thick, Alphan cock as though he’d done so a hundred times before. As though it were only *natural* for Hannibal to fill him this way.

“Will -” Words failed him as Will immediately lifted his hips and then sank down again, and his confusion must have been evident, for the Fae’s lips twisted into a grin so wide Hannibal could see his bloody fangs flashing in the moonlight.

“Dragons have the ability to mate as necessity dictates,” Will told him, voice breathy and high as he twisted his hips down on Hannibal’s cock. “When I mount you, I will knot. When you mount me…” Will started a slow, lazy rhythm, rocking on Hannibal’s length in a way that kept him mostly buried deep within him. He dropped down to bring their mouths together again, gasping against Hannibal’s lips as he found the angle he preferred and continued to work his body along Hannibal’s shaft.

“I’ll always be ready for you, Alpha. Warm and wet; open for your knot whenever you wish.” A whine slipped from Will’s throat, his eyes flashing gold as his movements increased, growing desperate.

Hannibal reached up to cup his beloved’s jaw, meeting Will’s gaze as his heartbeat slammed away in his chest. His throat felt tight as he struggled to form the words of the question burning in his soul. He hadn’t even thought to hope -

“And if I wish you fertile?”

“Yes,” Will hissed, hips jerking as he clenched around Hannibal; he was close to finding his release, but Hannibal couldn’t allow that. Not until Will was *his.* “I can give you a child, Alpha. *I will.”*

Hannibal gave a pleased growl and seized his mate, rolling them until Will was on his back, wings splayed out to either side of them. Will’s legs tightened around Hannibal instinctively, and when Hannibal began to fuck into him fervently, Will’s head dropped back, eyes squeezed shut, as he let out a nearly delirious cry of pleasure.

Will tightened further around Hannibal’s cock, pulling him impossibly closer as their bodies rocked together. Hannibal leaned low to scent Will’s cheek with his own, then lower still to lick at the warm, slightly pinkened skin of Will’s scent glands along the right side of his neck. Even as he was marking the spot where he would claim his mate, Will was doing the same to him, his lips moving nearly delicately against Hannibal’s flesh.

They didn’t hesitate, biting down until they broke skin and blood filled their mouths, the smell of it bright copper in the still night air. When they finally pulled away, Hannibal couldn’t help himself, capturing Will’s bloodied lips with his own and smearing crimson across their mouths and chins. Will’s legs were wrapped tightly around Hannibal, keeping him close, his wings twitching and fluttering with his pleasure where they were trapped beneath him.

Suddenly, Hannibal was on his back again, Will’s strong thighs settled on either side of him as he straddled him, sinking down onto Hannibal’s cock with a mewl. His hands scrabbled at Hannibal’s chest, turning to claws and sinking in as he rode Hannibal with fervent determination.

“Nearly there, Alpha. My mate. My *heart,”* Will announced with a breathy gasp. “I can feel you, feel our bond. Oh, Hannibal, it’s *wonderful.* Fill me now, knot me, *please -”*

Hannibal could feel it as well, as though a piece of himself he’d not even realized was missing all his life was suddenly there. A spot deep within his core was no longer an empty, echoing chasm in the shape of a Dragon with messy, firefly infested hair and eyes the color of the sea, but instead made whole and perfect by the presence of his mate.

He could feel Will as though tethered together, the thrum of his emotions seeping into Hannibal until it was difficult to determine how much arousal, pleasure, downright elation *he* was feeling, and how much was Will. He could feel the echo of Will singing through him as though they’d known each other, been together, for an entire lifetime. It was as though they

now shared the same spaces in the halls of Hannibal's memory, each moment a perfect imprint of one another's escence.

He could feel Will clenching around him as soon as his knot pressed in and caught against his rim, Will's body squeezing rhythmically around the intrusion as he spilled over Hannibal's belly and milked Hannibal's own release in turn. Hannibal could feel his seed spilling into Will's willing, desperate body, his cock twitching nearly violently at the image that flashed behind his eyes of his mate swollen and full of their child.

Will didn't wait to catch his breath before he collapsed onto Hannibal's own heaving chest, panting tiredly but purring contentedly. He nuzzled into Hannibal's neck, licking along the mark he'd lain to Hannibal's throat and lapping up the blood sluggishly pulsing from it.

"We must journey to the stone circle this evening, while the moon is still high. You will sit in the place where your innermost magic is most attuned and eat the fruit of the Fae." Will murmured against their bond mark, shifting slightly to look into Hannibal's eyes. "Our bond will bolster the Fae blood that has always been within you and partaking of our food will extend your mortal life as it does ours, I'm certain of it."

Hannibal's breath caught in his chest, only moments after having regained it. He reached for Will, tilting his face up from where he was still scenting Hannibal's neck to gaze upon his lovely face. "Extend it for how long?"

Will's fangs were dark with blood as he grinned down at Hannibal, his touch soft when he reached his own hand up to caress his mate's cheek. "Oh, my heart," he murmured, tone slightly chiding but full of mirth. "When I said *forever,* I meant it."

Chapter End Notes

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